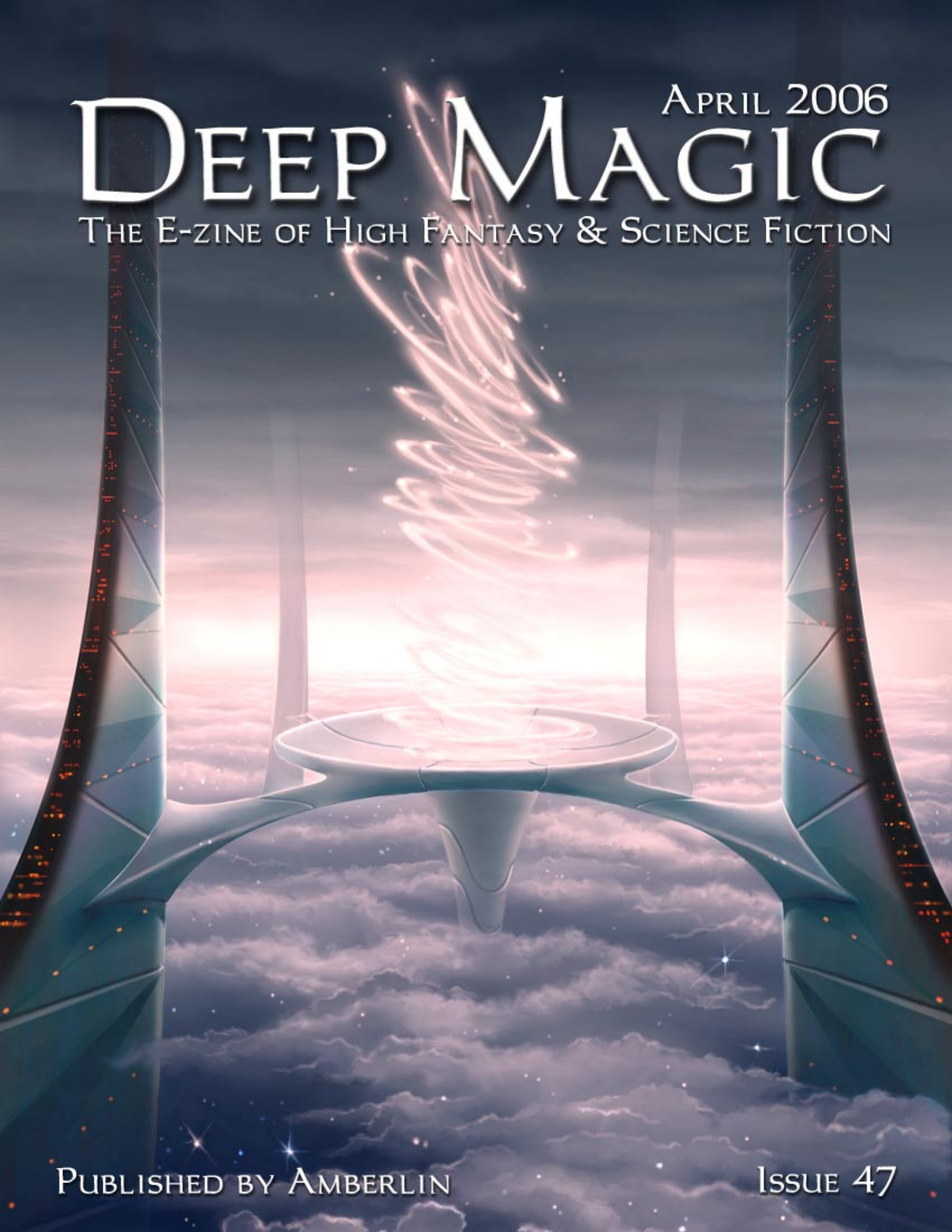
April 2006
Deep Magic
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April 2006

It's official. The weather is getting warmer and I'm much happier. Nothing like the warm sun and the kids being able to play outside to pick up your mood. The long winter is over, and it's now time to get active again. That includes here at Deep Magic.

The Lamp Post Awards voting is still going on. The first round is over, and now it's time to vote for the winners. Congratulations to all those who were voted into the finals. It's going to be a tough decision for all of us to choose. Be sure to cast your vote. The winners will be announced in the May issue.

I thought I'd make another plug for more sign-ups for our mailing list. We'd love to get those numbers up. It's free, and you'll never receive spam as a result. It does, however, let you know when we've released our next issue of Deep Magic or, on occasion, when we have special, earth-shattering news to share. Go to our website and click the 'mailing list' link.

We've got some great stories this month. Staff member Mark Reeder offers us *The Bigelow*, a scifi story that all should enjoy. Former staff member Scott Clements is also featured this month with his fantasy story, *Thief of Children*. Rounding out the stories is Erin Hoffman's *The Bearer*. You'll like all three stories. Our cover artist, Camille Kuo, is one to enjoy. Check out her artwork here and on her website. Not to be forgotten are our articles this month. Lynda Williams discusses the state of books in the digital era, and newly-published author David Keck offers some insight into the craft of writing.

That should do it for this month. Thank you for reading Deep Magic. Stop by the forums and let us know what you think.

Sincerely,

Jeremy Whitted
Chief Editor
Deep Magic

Safe Places for Minds to Wander

The Lamp Post Awards

The first round of voting for the 2006 Lamp Post Awards is over, and now it's time for the final vote. You should have already read most of these, so now it's time for one more vote. The finalists for each category are listed on this page. Go here to vote. The voting page will have links to the issues each story/artwork appears in. Drop by the forums if you have any questions. Voting for this round will end on April 20th.

VOTE HERE

Fantasy Short Story

A Sorcerous Mist by Simon Kewin
Carrying Souls by M. Thomas
Collection by Steven Richards
Imoen's Arrow by Robert Shell
Infestation by Ian Creasey
Jodhin by Q.S. Archer
The Ravenmaster by Jeff Wheeler

Cover Art

July 2004
September 2004
December 2004

SciFi Short Story

Contagion by Keith Robinson
Hunting with Flinteye by Sean T.M. Stiennon
Unless a Seed Dies by David Eland

Writing Challenge

Each month, Deep Magic offers an opportunity and a challenge for our readers who are also writers. These challenges are designed to help you develop your writing talents. All are welcome to participate. We select a small number of submissions each month for publication (we don't offer compensation for challenges).

To submit a challenge, go to our submissions system. You will need to create an author profile and account. Please note the deadline date.

April 2006 Writing Challenge
Entries due May 10, 2006

We all experience a gamut of emotions as we go through our lives. Over the period of a week or so, write down ten things that made you angry or pleased you, but do not try to explain why. Be specific because that makes it more realistic. Close observation of your immediate world is a good source of fiction and helps to develop a sense of detail. With your list of ten events, choose one or more of them and incorporate them into a scene or story. Remember, the more precise the detail, the more realistic is becomes. Try it out and keep it to 500 words.

Selections from the February 2005 Challenge

The Tower of Turmoil

The above story was selected from the February challenge, which was to create a short story using another author's voice.

Don't forget the March challenge due April 10:

Do you have any recurring dreams or nightmares? They are often a strong source of feelings and creativity. Use a dream or nightmare you have had as the inspiration for a story. Try and re-create the vividness that made it memorable to you. But it should be set in a fantasy or science fiction world. Keep it to 1000 words or less.

The Tower of Turmoil

By Matthew Dunn

A foul wind blew off the waters of the Astry Ocean. Across the Isles of Trumbull it sped, causing rapturous adulation from the pagans worshipping their dragon-gods; past the shore communities of the fisherfolk it meandered, bringing idle gossip of the migrations of the mer-salmon schools. Deep into the plains of Allordia, ignoring the Horsepeople of Allords, through the festering marshlands of Norjersie, and straight into the towering ruby city of Dulchess. The stench of the Norjer swamps dripped from the breeze as though by sheer stubbornness, stubbornness like that of the Lady Marguerite. Marguerite stood and hastily crossed the cold stone room of the tower to close the window's shutters, grimacing at the odor.

She absently smoothed out her skirt, nervously awaiting word of that dolt of a man, Tip. Despite his rugged countenance, the man with the golden curls sometimes positively made her skin crawl. She thought to herself, *Oh, I wish my friend Amorallia were here; she is so much wiser in the ways of properly handling men. Those oafs just need to be shown the right direction by a proper woman, and then they're usually tolerable!*

The roan Tip was riding sniffed warily at the foul-smelling breeze. He had been difficult to control ever since entering the towering ruby city of Dulchess, perhaps picking up on the subtle mood change of his rider upon reaching the final phase of this journey. Tip tried not to think about Marguerite, or her long auburn braid that draped so cordlike from her shoulder. If only Wallen were here. Wallen was so much better around women, he would know how to handle a volatile lady like Marguerite. Wallen was much more worldly, and a whole three days older than Tip as well. Surely he would not have the same problems finding words and remembering his point in conversations the way that Tip did.

Rather than brood on the problem awaiting him within the Tower, Tip chose instead to enjoy the splendor of the city during its annual harvest festival. Wagons and carts galore cluttered the market streets, and the throngs of people about made a short, simple ride to the tower into a maze of twists and 'pardon me's.' Banners of crimson, auburn, and tan hung between the many shops and boardinghouses, while many-colored wreaths decorated every door. Ahead, atop the immensely tall, dragon-scorched, ruby-colored tower that gave the towering ruby city of Dulchess its name, uncounted banners representing every known province of the lands fluttered and snapped in the wind.

A path finally opened between Tip and the Tower entrance, and silently cursing under his breath, he rode ahead to his fate.

Wallen couldn't believe his misfortune. After following that cursed Tip's orders for the last three weeks, his supposed best friend had left him magically hidden in a brothel while he went off scurrying into the towering ruby city of Dulchess at the slightest whim of his Lady Marguerite. Now, here was poor Wallen, abandoned in a house with fifteen nubile young ladies, all making the most decidedly inappropriate suggestions to him! And to think, they were even offering their services free of charge, nay, begging him to take them up on their offers! Well, Wallen was no freeloader. He was far too proper a young man to enlist the services of these girls,

and even if he weren't, he would certainly pay them their hard-earned wages!

Instead, Wallen disguised himself in a cloak of the magikal brotherhood, and bought passage in the back of a passing merchant's turnip wagon. Although the Smoochiites were out in droves in the city, denouncing any members of the brotherhood they found, it was Wallen's only possible disguise. Finally, after what seemed like ages of bumps and jolts among the turnips, the merchant called back to him, "Well, young fella, we're here. I don't know who it was you were running from, but I hope they don't find you here, in the Towering City."

Wallen thanked the man and decided to walk the remaining league into the towering ruby city, hoping to enjoy the splendor of the city during its annual harvest festival. Wagons and carts galore cluttered the market streets, and the throngs of people about made a short, simple walk through the city into a maze of twists and 'watch yerself's.' Banners of auburn, crimson, and tan hung between the many shops and boardinghouses, while many-colored wreaths decorated every door. Ahead, atop the immensely tall, dragon-scorched, ruby-colored tower that gave the towering ruby city of Dulchess its name, uncounted banners representing every known province of the lands fluttered and snapped in the wind.

Wallen vowed to find Tip before his golden-haired friend could make a fool of himself, and entered the Tower.

The Lady Marguerite was feeling overly warm and decided to open the shutters, despite the stench of the wind. Far below, among the commoners whom she loved, yet never spoke to, she could see the wonders of her city during its autumn harvest festival. Wagons and carts galore cluttered the market streets, and the throngs of people about made the maze-like pattern of streets below appear pulsing with life. Banners of tan, auburn, and crimson hung between the many boardinghouses and shops, while multicolored wreaths decorated every door. Above her, atop the immensely tall, dragon-scorched, ruby-colored tower that gave the towering ruby city of Dulchess its name, uncounted banners representing every known province of the lands fluttered and snapped in the wind.

Yet, wistful longing was not the impression she wished to convey to that lout, Tip, when he arrived, so she instead sat upon her divan, by the fire, looking every bit as majestic as she could. Her maids had told her he had but recently ridden into the stables, and they seemed all a-bubble at his good looks and rugged handsomeness. That brutish man was probably counting the ways he could squirrel them off somewhere and hold hands with them in the dark recesses of her ruby Tower. It was enough to make her yank her braid! "Ugh! Men!" she shouted to the empty room.

Tip finally reached the doors to Lady Marguerite's suite high up in the ruby Tower, but stopped to marshal his thoughts before entering her chambers. "If only Wallen were here, he would know what to do!" he thought, not for the first time that day. As he reached for the polished brass knobs, a voice called out from behind him, "Don't go in those doors, Tip!"

Wallen came panting up the stairs, reaching frantically for Tip's arm.

"Wallen, don't try to stop me, I must go to her!" Tip said to his childhood friend.

Wallen could only sigh at his friend, but inwardly cursed the woman who so changed Tip. The Tip he grew up with would never have stood for the senseless demands she made of him. He knew there was only one way to save Tip from himself.

Marguerite lay sobbing on the hearth in front of the fire. Tip had just left, after having the gall to show up with his friend! Wasn't that just like a man to bring his cronies along when

she was ready to bare her soul to him! Men were such fools! She gave her braid such a fierce yank that she erupted into a fresh bout of tears. Here she was, ready to profess her unwavering love for Tip, and he lacked the brains to even come alone. Well, if he thought she would debase herself so in front of his friend—for their amusement!—he obviously knew nothing about women!

"I just don't understand it, Wallen," Tip was saying over the warm ale that a particularly saucy and flirtatious copper-haired wench had brought them. "She sent a messenger all the way to the Flogging Isles, just to bring me with haste, and all she wanted to do was scold us on the condition of our traveling tunics? I'll never understand women."

Wallen thought about his friend's dilemma. He also noticed, in the filthy mirror about the bar, the copper-haired wench sitting upon a soldier's lap, laughing uproariously. "No, there's no understanding them, Tip," he concurred.

Thief of Children

By Scott Clements

Away, come away:
empty your heart of its mortal dream.
The winds awaken, the leaves whirl round,
Our cheeks are pale, our hair is unbound,
Our breasts are heaving, our eyes are agleam,
Our arms are waving, our lips are apart;
And if any gaze on our rushing band,
We come between him and the deed of his hand,
We come between him and the hope of his heart.

The Hosting of the Sidhe
William B. Yeats

I

"Finally," Niall said with a smile. Beneath the wavering glow of his lantern, he stared down at his baby girl, born just three short weeks ago and so very new to the world. Her eyes closed, her mouth twitched with half-smiles. "What do you think she dreams of?"

On pronunciation:

Casidhe = CAW—shee
Niall = NEE—ul
Orlaith = OR—la

Beside him, Casidhe reached across the small wooden cradle that had taken Niall weeks to carve and finish, and pulled the blanket up a little higher. "Your face and voice," she whispered. "The soft touch of my hand on her face. Of bright things and love, the only things she has known in the world. Now, hush. Would you wake her again?"

"Not for all the gold in the world." Over the softness of his voice, thunder stirred the gray-dark night. "But she will sleep for a time, I think. The storms have not yet finished with us, and she likes the sound and smell of the rain."

"Like her father."

Casidhe bent over and kissed the sleeping child. "She is beautiful, Niall."

"She is the most beautiful, most precious girl in all the world."

Casidhe smiled. "Have you replaced me already?"

Niall laughed and pulled her to him. "No, not yet at least," he said. Beyond the window thunder, much closer this time, rumbled in the night sky. "Perhaps when you are old and wrinkled," he sighed, "or when your constant nagging has finally grown unbearable."

"Ah, so soon then?"

Niall smiled. She had always been quicker, cleverer than he. "I can only pray that this wonderful, perfect child grows into the woman her mother is. I could think of no greater

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Poor Man's Game or Eternal Art? Books in the Digital Era

By Lynda Williams

I love books. I have also spent much of my adult life, to date, contributing to the cultural revolution of the digital era, from my FreeNet work to introducing web-based courses at my university. I also watch movies and play video games. Since I have always done all these things simultaneously, I never understood the Big Scare about books becoming obsolete. It felt like someone insisting fried eggs would vanish from menus, the world over, because ice cream was getting too popular. It baffled me.

As I approach my fifties, I finally think I get it. A little bit. But I still think the fear is wrong-headed. How books get produced and sold is changing. Yes, indeed. There are more small presses (as well as big scams), and mass market sales have narrowed down to concentrate fiercely on best-sellers to the detriment of diversity. But this may be a good thing for the art form, even if it reduces the income of writers already established with big publishing companies.

True, the entertainment market is dominated by movies, with games contesting with them for the royal scepter of maximum profitability. But popular forms of entertainment were always more…well…popular than those that demand more of their audience. So what? Not everything is about being the number-one-most-profitable media. For one thing, books are still the source of most of the best stories that make it into other media in the end. For another, they have things to offer that counterpoint the digital era. Things like permanence vs. transience and complexity vs. the 30-second window for delivering a message. Few people have the luxury of settling down with a good book, maybe, but it is still in that fertile, experiential space, that profound things germinate.

Books will be loved in new ways in the digital era. They can't be aloof and foreboding, as they have sometimes been portrayed. They need to get down off the shelf and out into the world, flowing through book clubs and read aloud at gatherings; reviewed and argued about by more than just professional critics; illustrated and podcast; collected and traded; rising to prominence through bottom-up processes in reading communities and blessed with awards by the literary elite who have a complementary and equally valid role to play; circulated in a variety of forms and imprints; scribbled on in the margins by their readers, but for all the world to see; reacted to in public and treated like friends (or enemies).

In a world where it is harder and harder to find the right setting for a good, long think about anything, books are one of the few surviving forms of magic able to encompass deep reflection, casting spells that penetrate deeper than the amazing rush of visual spectacle and vicarious thrill of a blockbuster movie. They are different and appeal to different people. But to proclaim them extinct is as silly as declaring classical music defunct because hip-hop racks up better sales.

In short, I see no quarrel between movies and books. Nor books and games. Except in the ludicrous claims of games, in particular, to be able to out-do literature in the symphony of shaped, emotional experience that an artist builds into a narrative to make it literature. My reaction to such claims is dumbfounded bewilderment, followed by compassion for anyone whose

grasp of literature is so shallow that they perceive no more than If/Then branches or a set of programming schemas in a work of art, deaf to the orchestration behind the scenes. Rather as if they viewed the point, in Hamlet, as being how to win the duel at the end, or extract information from a ghost.

I would not be sorry to see games replace books that do no more than capture action movies in print. I'd probably play such a game, once. I enjoy playing games. I enjoy role-playing, as well, but that is only the training ground for literature (whether realized in movies or in books). The power of literature is in the orchestration of its layered parts.

Handing every reader a baton won't get you a symphony, although you may inspire one, eventually, by giving a new musician the experience of being in control. But in the end, we still need scores created by great artists, and great improvisers too, as in jazz. Creating games that empower non-musicians to mess around with the raw materials, and adding some thematic or emotional elements to those raw materials, is an exciting goal. But it is not the end of narrative as a self-consciously manipulated art form.

If literature ever does lose its place in the world to admittedly captivating problem-solving exercises without any emotional, moral or artistic validity, in which, for example, the death of a character has no meaning beyond being a bit of bad luck, then it will be time for me to start pushing up grass somewhere, because the world will no longer make sense. There will be nothing worthwhile to hang onto and believe in anymore.

With any luck, I'll be buried with some good books.

Links of Interest

- A Clash between Game and Narrative by Jesper Juul, IT University of Copenhagen.
- Is it a Book? A site with essays and discussion centred around the nonlinearity of discourse in pre-print, print and post-print eras.

The Bigelow

By Mark Reeder

Lungs wheezing, heart churning, the fat man limped out of the night-dark alley and slammed into a light-carved street. Eyes blinking against the glare of neon, stuttering messages across gaudy storefronts, he stumbled back into the alley's mouth and stopped, bent over and heaving for air. He swiped sweat from his face, felt it trickle down his arms and spine, cling to the curly, gray hairs of his chest. Swarms of people oozed down the sidewalk, a wide conga line of gawkers and shoppers, spilling occasionally into the street. He took a step toward them, hesitated, half turned around. The alley's darkness swallowed the hissing lights. He strained, saw nothing but shadow. He let out a halfhearted sigh of relief.

He'd lost his pursuer. *Maybe.*

He breathed in, more steadily now, but no less scared. The air smelled of stale beer and bile. He looked down. A yellowish-green stain spread across his pants. He grimaced, remembering the fear-choking vomit and running. Then nothing until he reached this place. He was in an ante-corridor neighborhood, rundown but still mostly clean with only some spillover from the highrise res. The building next to him was an ancient brewery. He looked up. Two second story windows stared back at him, dark and empty, the glass uncommonly intact. He could hear faint, tinny sounds of Pod music coming from a third floor window that also let out a flickering light from candles.

Over her shoulder she called out, "Hey! Come watch this." A teenager with a mandala etched on the right side of his chest shoved his head out beside hers. "There's a Bigelow down there."

A soft whispering overhead. He ducked behind a garbage can, heard the noise pass and looked up. A flitter taxi glided over the buildings, its white crysteel wings reflecting light pollution from the Cincy-Pitts Corridor. He clenched his fists and, for a moment, willed it to land. Then it was gone, behind the rooftop.

He slammed his hand against the brewery. Crumbling brick left a dark red smear on his palm. "Damn!" he shouted, and his voice echoed in the night. Wincing, he flattened against the wall, eyes scanning the alley.

When he calmed down again, he slid along the building's street-side face. Dust streaked his shoulders red. He squeezed through an iron gate and went up to the front door. Surprise flashed across his face. It was palm locked.

"Hey!" he called out. "Somebody let me in!"

An emaciated, middle-aged woman with roses tattooed across her naked breasts leaned out of an upper floor window. "Shut up!" she shouted. Over her shoulder she called out, "Hey! Come watch this." A teenager with a mandala etched on the right side of his chest shoved his head out beside hers. "There's a Bigelow down there."

The young man scratched at the ever present lice in the hair on his belly and shrugged. "I bet the old fart runs," he said and turned away.

"I'll bet you a day's water ration he's too scared to run."

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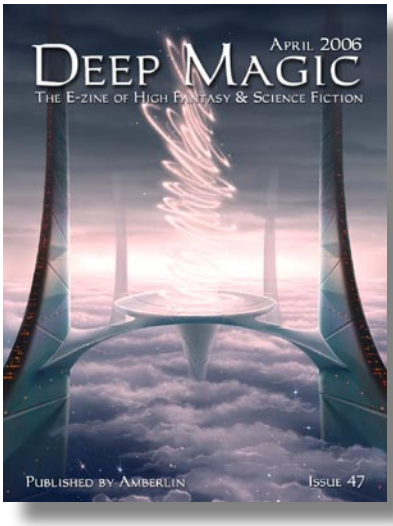
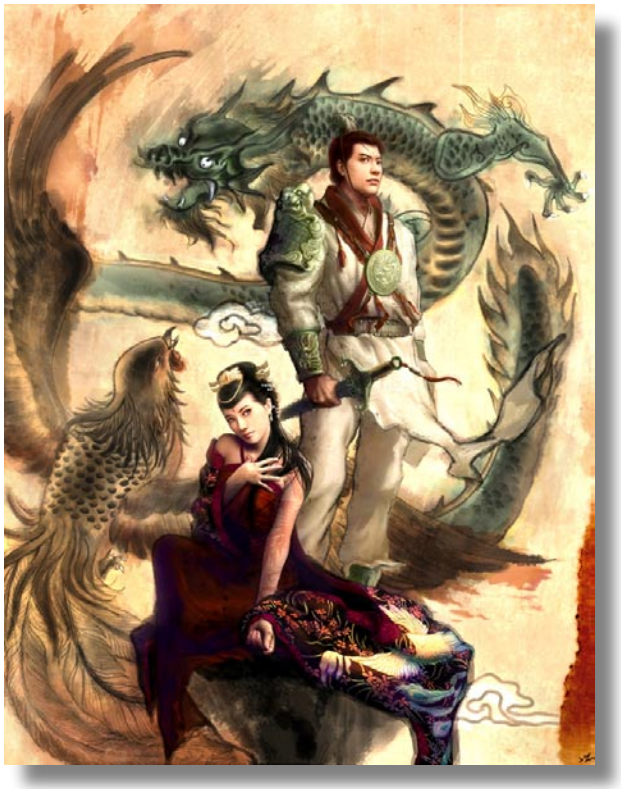
Featured Artist
Camille Ching-Yun Kuo



Age: 22
Residence: Taiwan, ROC.
Marital Status: Single
Children: None
Hobbies: Playing video games, singing, sleeping in the morning & waking up in the afternoon.
Personal Quote: "Looks right, it's right, then it's right. Looks wrong but it's right, then it's wrong. Looks right but it's wrong, then it's right."
Favorite Book or Author: Hmm…I don't like reading.
Professional and Educational Information: A student in 4 year University.
Started Painting In: 11th grade.
Artist Most Inspired By: Too many to list.
Media You Work In: For traditional: oil and pastel. For digital: Photoshop and a little Painter.
Educational/Training Background: For art, not until Junior year in the university. Schools Attended: Christian High School, Community College, and then University.
Other Training: For art, none.
Where Your Work Has Been Published or Displayed: 3D User Magazine (Taiwan), Exotique (Australia), Borderline Magazine (French), InterNOVA 2 (Germany), The 3rd Alternative 42 (UK), 2005 Comic & CG Yearbook (China), EXPOS?II (Australia), and DPI issue55 (Taiwan).
Where Someone Can Buy Your Art or Contact You Professionally: Anyone can visit my website to purchase prints of my art, or email me for commissions or buying copyrights of previous art that I've already done.
Website URL: http://camilkuo.com



Q: How did you come to be an artist?
A: I loved handcrafts when I was young, but I was not so much into drawing or painting at that early age. I started to draw manga in junior high to entertain myself, and then I discovered digital painting with many great digital artworks during my high school years. I began training myself and

continued on next page

producing artwork like there was no tomorrow. I was very into digital painting, and I hardly left the house.

Q: How would you describe your work?
A: It's fantasy with a little bit of horror definitely, but not necessary high fantasy like an elf or a dwarf. Basically anything that escapes present time.

Q: Where do you find your inspiration?
A: From nature and anything I see and feel in life.

Q: What inspired this piece (our cover art)? (Tell us its story...)
A: It's not a story but an idea of how the future of mankind might be—a bionic machine world.

Q: What has been your greatest success in your artistic career?
A: I haven't achieved it yet.

Q: What trends are you seeing in the Sci-Fi/Fantasy genre?
A: It's clear that the fantasy and sci-fi genres have been hot in the entertainment industry, such as movies. Computer technology has been developed as well, lately; therefore, a lot of special effects, action, and figures can be generated on the computer. Because of this advantage, the sci-fi/fantasy genre can be well performed. Sci-Fi/Fantasy has always been a popular theme in the gaming industry, and it'll continue as long as there are people who want to escape present time.

Of Elbows and Bathwater

By David Keck

I have research pathology. Without a clear understanding of santeria, wooden boat building and the plumbing under Canterbury, I often feel that I can't write the next page. Before my heroic character can cross the street, I must ransack the nearest bookstore.

While any outsider must instantly recognize this for sheer procrastination, *I* believe that I make these trips through the bookshelves of the world in search of elbows.

On its own, my imagination turns out ideas of many shapes. But compared to anything found beyond my door, these shapes are bizarrely smooth and strangely simple. They make sense from end to end. And they often borrow from the same easy sources.

It is as though my imagination is fishing around in its own bathwater.

In the world around me, there is nothing so simple. No single imagination invented Christmas, the New York City public school system, or party politics. Every impulse has been checked, every direction redirected, and a thousand contradictions heaped on the back of every hallowed custom.

When I dig through the library, I find myself hunting for just these gawky redirections. I collect them in little notebooks and hoard them like carbuncles. Who could imagine that a few bouts of TB in back-woods Europe would lead to fangs, garlic, bustiers and fishnet stockings? But this seems to be the way the world works.

To build a world with the same creaks and rattles as the real one, I need to read. I need to search for the gangling contradictions and tangle them up like a typing bowerbird.

Even the beautiful have elbows. The sun god must let his son borrow his chariot. Your father's pea-green family V-8 has to be named after an antelope. And every year a dead Turkish bishop must slide down your chimney to insert oranges in the end of your sock.

This is the world we live in—and we know a fraud when we see it.

My advice? Get out of the bathwater and search for those elbows!

The Bearer

By Erin Hoffman

The kettle was rattling on the stove when the thin thread of a child's scream pierced through its small thunder. I stood, the scrape of my chair a goose-honk on the rough plank floorboards, and went to the counter. With an old knit potholder I lifted the kettle from the iron and listened.

Silence. Beneath it, the twitter-chat of birds at the stone bath by the window, and then there it was again: high and distinctive, the cry of a child in pain. I digested the sound like a birdwatcher, measuring its pitch, matching it against the many samples in my memory. I set the kettle and potholder on the stone countertop; my tea would have to wait.

Brushing black dust from my hands, I walked through the house, my little pocket of blue twilight, and took a deep breath as I reached the door. My timing is always right; I opened it to admit a gaggle of village women that poured inside with a flood of heavy summer sunlight. I shut the door behind them, returning the house to its comfortable curtain-filtered darkness. The women were laying a whimpering girl upon my couch before the hearth.

I have never been able to describe how I do this, except that it is like a bird flying from hand to hand, and the bird knows where to go.

Little Maggie Cooper had been hunting wild honey again where she shouldn't've. My arms were folded when I approached, but it was too late to straighten them, and I instead tried simply to soften my expression as I surveyed the damage.

Maggie's normally frizzy red curls were caked with dirt turned to mud with her sweat. Her face was smudged where it wasn't painted with tear-streaks, and as I approached her, pain buzzed at me like the bees that had gotten the best of her. The family—I watched them out of the corner of my eye, mother and sisters—fidgeted, but I remained still, observing. Her grimy skin repulsed me; did any child stay clean for more than half a moment? She had been stung before, attempting to raid the old oak hive, but this was worse. She could die from it. I waited.

The girl began to scream again with renewed vigor and finally one of the women couldn't contain herself. "Bearer?" she said, and, when I did not answer, "Bellona?" I was secretly impressed that she managed to make herself heard over Maggie's rather impressive shrieks. I met her worried frown with a nod and knelt by the couch.

It was never easy, but with time it became less impossible. I felt my muscles clench just before I touched her, but I firmly steered my hands to her shoulders anyway. My eyes shut as I swam into her mind, opening the gates between us and letting her pain through.

I have never been able to describe how I do this, except that it is like a bird flying from hand to hand, and the bird knows where to go.

Venom crept into my arms, tingling through my fingers and making my joints ache. The clenching of my shoulders made it worse, but I couldn't stop it; never have been able to. I kept my grip strong and hollowed myself out, making space in my chest for Maggie's injuries. They pounded into me, pressing against the parts that were mine, muddying me, blotting out what

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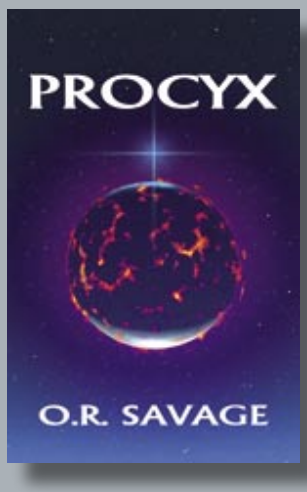

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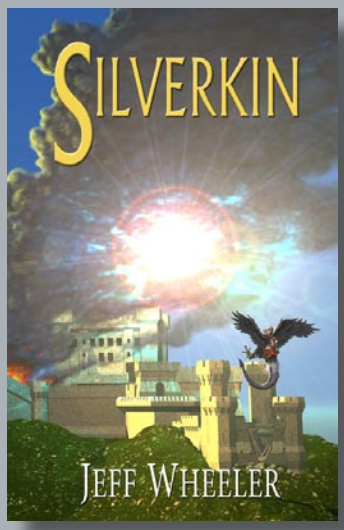

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Editor's Choice: Fantasy

Elantris
By Brandon Sanderson

Elantris was the city of magic inhabited by a race of mystical beings. One was not born an Elantrian—one was re-born as one. The process was called the Shaod, a mystical event that struck randomly, affecting beggars and kings, transforming them into silver-haired beings of tremendous power. But ten years ago, it all came to an end. Instead of heralding near-divinity, the Shaod induced a condition more akin to leprosy than immortality. The grandeur was lost.

The novel begins ten years after the fall of Elantris with Prince Raoden, the crown prince of Arelon, awakening on a dull day to find that the Shaod has afflicted him. Instead of marrying the princess of Teod, he is wrapped in graveclothes and shunted into the city of the damned. His heart no longer beats. Every scrap of pain he suffers becomes a never-ending torment where he learns that most Elantrians have lost their minds with the constant suffering. Ever an optimist, Raoden pours his heart into his new surroundings, seeking to learn more about the ancient power of the Elantrians and how it might be reversed—if he does not go mad with pain first.

Raoden's betrothal to the princess of Teod, a strong-willed diplomat named Sarene, does not end with his supposed death. So Sarene arrives as a widow rather than as a bride. Instead of trying to repudiate the alliance, she seeks to serve her husband's people. Her political acumen serves her well as the proselytizing priests of Jaddeth seek to convert the inhabitants or kill them all in a holy crusade. Sarene's experience and wit serves her well in Arelon, though she grieves for the relationship with Raoden that she was never able to consummate.

Elantris is a debut fantasy novel that fulfils its promises. Sanderson takes the clichés of the genre and completely reinvents them. Elantrians are akin to elves, but the Shaod makes it possible for anyone to become one. The Seon are floating orbs of sentient light that bond with masters. They communicate, offer advice, and serve incredibly useful purposes, like allowing Sarene to talk to her father though he is far away. The magic of the Elantrians, called Aon Dor, is very inventive. The practitioner draws symbols in the air which invokes the power and causes an effect—from healing a sword wound to blasting an enemy with fire. The words of the Aons are rife with inner meanings and a complexity that is fascinating. The pacing of the story is a little slow in the first two thirds of the book, and I found the dilemma of Raoden's existence in the city of Elantris more compelling than the court intrigues of his wife, Sarene, or the zealous chapters assigned to the Jaddeth priest come to forewarn Arelon of its imminent destruction. There were enough twists and turns that kept me turning the pages quickly, and the climax of the novel with its revelations and intensity made it well worth the wait. Some of the dialogue, at times, came across as too similar to expressions we hear in our world, which jarred me from the story. But the conviction and compassion of the characters and the compelling tragedy of the Shaod provided a feast that I enjoyed to the last page.

Possible Objectionable Material: depiction of genocide and one scene involving a cult ritual, though not graphic in detail.

(Reviewed by Jeff Wheeler)

continued on next page

Book Review: Fantasy

March Upcountry

By David Weber and John Ringo

Prince Roger Ramius Sergei Chiang MacClintock is the third child of the Empress of Man, and most people who know him consider him a spoiled brat. His marine bodyguards, the Bronze Battalion of Her Majesty's Own, think he's a joke, with his flowing blond hair and childish moods, and most soldiers transfer to other posts within eighteen months. Roger himself wishes he could get more respect, but...it never seems to happen.

When his mother sends him off to a minor diplomatic function on an obscure planet famous for the stench of its fishing industry, he knows she's just trying to get him out of her hair, and it doesn't do anything to improve his mood. However, Roger's ship is crippled by a saboteur en route and then attacked by the Saints, the Empire's greatest enemies. Roger, his dapper servant Kostas Matsugae, his exasperated chief-of-staff Eleanora O'Casey, and the Bronze Battalion are forced to flee their destroyed ship and make an emergency landing on the world of Marduk, a primitive planet covered in oppressively hot jungle. Their mission: March halfway around the planet on foot to capture the world's only spaceport, held by the Saints, where they hope to commandeer a ship which will get them home.

But many obstacles lie in their path, including native predators, the heat and moisture of the jungle (which threatens to disable all the advanced weapons they need to take the spaceport), and the Mardukans themselves, a species of three-meter tall, four armed warriors. Their mission is further jeopardized by Roger himself, whose judgment on when to shoot is often poor.

March Upcountry wasn't really bad, but there just wasn't too much in it that I thought was particularly good. The writing is fairly bland, with some contorted and clichéd analogies like "they were packed in like old fashioned sardines in a can". The book seemed too long–five hundred pages–for the amount of interesting material it contained.

One problem is that none of the dangers they faced seemed particularly threatening to me–the marines have such advanced weaponry that they blast through whatever attacks them, animal or sentient, and the action scenes were further weakened because I thought the authors downplayed the effectiveness of traditional weaponry. The Mardukans don't seem to have invented bows, although their technology level is basically medieval, and an ambush with long bows made for three-meter tall beings would cut the marines down pretty quickly, plasma or no plasma. In general, the battle scenes seemed more interested in military jargon and talking up the prowess of the marines than in portraying the action in a dramatic and interesting fashion.

The cast of characters seemed fairly standard—there's the smart one, the gruff commander, the company prankster, the crusty mechanic with a comical accent. They weren't even consistent—at one point, the company captain curses, and we're told that it's the first time he's ever sworn. Later, he's dropping cusses right along with his men at the slightest provocation. Prince Roger himself was more interesting, but I thought he wasn't quite spoiled enough—many of his actions which send the marines into fits of rage seemed fairly excusable to me, if not quite ideal.

March Upcountry is the first book in a trilogy, but I probably won't be seeking out the other books in the foreseeable future.

Possible Objectionable Content: Extensive swearing, including numerous comically accented f-words. There's also a good deal of bloody combat violence, including a disturbing death by poison.

(Reviewed by Sean T.M. Stiennon)

Book Review: Fantasy

The Fragment

By Lance Bond

I have before me the latest in a steady stream of self-published and small-house books that seem to make a steady stream to my door. It bears the marks of such a book: simplistic cover art and layout, bombastic claims about the contents of the book ('the most detailed fantasy world ever created'), and more typos than one would find in a book from a large publisher.

With the number of books I read each year as consideration for this column, it becomes quite easy to judge a book by its cover, especially since those judgments usually turn out to be accurate when I read the actual book.

But I'm glad—no, pleased—to say that *The Fragment* is a wonderful book that one cannot judge by its appearance. The story is the first in a series set on the fictional world of Hârn, a world created originally for a role-playing game. The story opens with a prologue that sets the tone for the book. The sorcerer Emperor Saurach uses an artifact from another reality, known as the Fragment, to transport a soul from one body to another. Just as he is about to consolidate his power with the Fragment, he is wounded by his enemies. His body appears to die, and so he is taken to a secret burial chamber, there to wait nearly seventy years for a warrior to come along whose body he can possess with the help of the Fragment.

Nearly seventy years later, the Corani Empire of western Hârn is on the brink of total anarchy, with various factions vying for power. One of the warlords is the religious leader, the Morgathian Gurim Zard, who is seeking to consolidate his power by finding the Fragment and using it for his own evil ends.

In the midst of all this is Artace Kand, the illegitimately born son of a Coranian noble, who has just come home to find that his brother Eladas has taken on the role of Lord of Edino, but has had his mind poisoned by one of Zard's minions. As a result, Eladas does not trust Artace and will instead do whatever his right-hand man tells him to do.

Also thrust into the turmoil is Bonlia Taladin from eastern Hârn, who through a series of incidents beyond her control, finds herself in Coranan, working for the secret Order of the White Hand, in an attempt to find the Fragment before Zard does.

Artace and Bonlia cross paths and join forces, Bonlia to find the Fragment and Artace to bring peace to Edino where the evil Morgathians are killing any that get in their way.

The story builds to a climactic confrontation between Artace, Bonlia, and Zard, but don't expect resolution. This book is but the first part of a multi-volume epic. But don't let that dissuade you from picking it up. Ignore its packaging: this is an excellent read and an enjoyable story. Once I got over my prejudices about its appearance, I found I couldn't put it down. Now I'm waiting for the next volume to find out how the heroes who survived this volume will continue in their quest for peace in Hârn.

Possible objectionable material: There are a couple attempted rapes, but neither is accomplished.

(Review by Matthew Scott Winslow)

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blessing."

"Well," she whispered, snuggling deeper into his embrace, "that's better."

Niall held her close for a moment, then took her by the hand. "Come," he said, "we should let her sleep. Goodnight, little one. May the Lord God guard your sleep."

As they turned together toward the doorway, a flash of lightning lit the sky beyond the deer's hide that covered the small window in the nursery. When the thunder came, very near now, it resounded with force enough to rattle the small wooden toys in the chest that rested against the wall opposite the cradle.

When they reached the thin curtain that separated the rooms, Niall turned. In the light of his lantern he could see the outline of the cradle. Raising the light, he revealed the small iron crucifix hung upon the wall above the sleeping child. For a moment, he stared at the cross, lost in thoughts and memories better left buried.

"Niall?" Casidhe whispered, tugging on Niall's hand. Niall pulled his gaze from the cross and thrust his thoughts aside. He turned to her and smiled, then let Casidhe pull him through the curtain into the room beyond.

Across the nursery, the iron crucifix trembled before the burgeoning fury of the storm.

* * *

The hearth at the center of the small cabin crackled with warmth as white smoke rose up the flue and escaped into the stormy night. The smell of roast rabbit, lightly spiced with herbs from the forest, still lingered in the air; Casidhe's kill from earlier in the day while Niall sat with Orlaith. Absently, he recalled those days during their first year together spent practicing with her in the woods. She had been eager to learn and he had been surprised at how quickly and easily the skill had come to her. She shot nearly as well he did now. Which was good. It meant that she could do the hunting once in a while, leaving him to spend more time with his daughter.

Over the familiar sounds of the falling rain and the moaning wind, over the crackle-snap of flame and the crushing din of thunder, Casidhe hummed quietly. It was an old song, one he did not remember the name of. But he loved—had always loved—when she made music, and he would not stop her to find the name. It was not long before the rich scent of burning wood, the staccato rhythm of the falling rain, and the feel of Casidhe's graceful fingers idly twisting the ends of his long hair, wove together to fashion about him a deep serenity. Niall's eyes grew heavy and his mind began to drift as images of his daughter's face came to him unbidden. He smiled as he realized he had never, in all his days, been so happy.

Niall had just begun to fall asleep when the lightning blazed.

Even through the lids of his eyes the blue-white flash on the other side of the hide-covered window was brilliant. Startled, Niall opened his eyes and his head shot up. A moment later the walls of the cabin trembled and a crack that was not thunder struck.

"Niall?" Casidhe asked quietly.

Niall laid a hand upon her shoulder and listened as the cabin groaned. "It's all right," he said at last, letting out a breath he had not been aware he was holding. "I think everything is—"

Shadows danced across the taut deerskin, brought to life by the flickering glow of red-orange flames beyond the window.

"The lightning," Casidhe said, eyes wide. She knew as well as he the dangers of a lightning strike in the woods. Together, they hurried to the door.

"Praise God," Niall said, breathing a sigh of relief. As neatly as a sword stroke, the

lightning had severed a large branch from the towering oak that grew at the edge of the clearing where they had chosen to make their home. The burning branch had fallen into the clearing and narrowly missed the surrounding trees. Already the heavy rains began to douse the flames. The aged oak would bear the scar of the assault, but, as so many old things did, it would survive.

"We were lucky," Casidhe said, reaching for his hand.

Before Niall could reply, his baby screamed and nothing was ever the same again.

* * *

Driven by the howling wind, rain lanced into the nursery through the open window. Above the cradle the tattered remains of the thick, heavy hide he had fastened so securely as proof against the anticipated storm flapped and cracked against the walls of the cabin.

Niall froze and the blood in his veins turned to ash. Unable to look away, he stared at the window, at the shredded remains of the deerskin flapping in the night.

Not the storm. No wind or driving rain had shredded the thick, heavy hide. Niall staggered forward, understanding already beginning to master him.

"Orlaith?" Casidhe called from someplace far away. She shoved past him and rushed into the nursery. "Orlaith!"

He scarcely heard his wife's cry as his gaze shifted from the open window to a place on the wall above the cradle. "No," he rasped, as the fear of all his days met his gaze and ground him to his knees. "Oh, God, no." Through eyes blurred with tears, Niall stared in absolute horror at the empty place on the wall where the Crucifix had been. "Great and merciful God, please..." He shifted his gaze again, and he watched Casidhe rush to the cradle. Futilely, he reached out a hand. He wanted to call to her, to stop her before she reached the cradle. Why couldn't he call to her? Why wasn't he outside, chasing after his baby in the storm? What kind of father was he to stand so idly by?

One who, beyond all possibility of doubt, understood the truth.

Across from him, Casidhe drew near the cradle. The wind through the window carried with it the faint smell of burned wood and felt colder than it should have, pricking his skin like a million shards of blown glass. Outside the nursery, the crack of the torn hide as it snapped against the side of the cabin was as sharp and clear as the lash of a whip.

Casidhe reached the cradle.

Screamed.

The sound curdled blood and soul. He could not breathe. Casidhe crumpled to the floor and sprawled amid the pooling rain and lay still.

They steal children in the night.

"No. No. No." Wiping his eyes with the back of his hand, he staggered across the rain-soaked floor toward his wife. As he did, he saw the cross on the floor beneath the cradle. The storm, the rattling walls. Fool! He should have checked, should have secured it better.

Hadn't. And now...

Now.

Niall reached his wife and draped his body over her prone form to keep the rain from her. His face close to hers, he stroked her cheek, whispered her name. When she did not answer, he turned to the cradle.

They steal children in the night.

Gathering to him all his courage, Niall laid the head of his wife gently on the floor and

looked up at the looming cradle. His breath exploded from his lungs in rapid, heaving bursts. Hands trembling, eyes sealed tight, he grasped the side of the cradle and gritted his teeth. "No," he whispered, willing himself to his feet. "Please, God, no."

When he stood over the cradle, Niall opened his eyes.

"NO!" he screamed, spinning away from the sight that greeted him and vomiting onto the wet floor. He gripped his head in his hands, fingers laced and knotted in his dripping hair, and slipped to the ground beside his wife.

"Oh God, oh God, oh God," he muttered over the growling thunder, his head rocking back and forth. Unable to distinguish between tears and rain, he wiped savagely at his eyes and nose with the back of his hand and drew a ragged breath. When he felt ready, he rose and turned back to the cradle.

It was mottled green, the thing that lay now in the place where his child had lain, and covered with a thin sheen of shimmering mucus. Its round face was appalling, a bloated parody of an infant's face, eyes, nose and mouth swollen shut. Its small arms and legs were bent at hideous angles and covered with suppurating wounds. Its chest did not rise and fall, and it made no sound. Niall suspected that wherever it had come from, the thing had never been alive.

They steal children in the night. Sometimes they leave something behind, something wicked and cruel.

At his feet, his wife began to stir. Niall, head turned away in revulsion, reached into the cradle and pulled the blanket over the dead grotesquerie.

"Niall?" his wife whispered, struggling to sit up. "Niall, what happened? I had the worst nightmare. I dreamed—"

She seemed to notice the rain then, and the wetness of her face and clothes. Casidhe's eyes opened and met his own.

"No," she said simply. She shook her head.

Niall could not hold her gaze. He fell to his knees beside her and tried to hold her.

"No," she said again, struggling to rise.

Niall tightened his hold on her.

"Let go, Niall," she said, her struggles growing. "She was just here. You should be out there now, looking for her. We can still find her."

"We won't find her." A truth he had known from the start. He held her tighter. When he would not let her go, Casidhe began to flail her arms.

"Let go," she said again, more urgently. "I have to go outside; I have to find her."

Niall closed his eyes and waited. The darkness was full of pain.

"Niall," she said, "let go. I can find her. Let go!"

Niall tucked his head and it began. Casidhe kicked and clawed at him. Her rage was primal, the atavistic fury of a mother seeking to protect her only child. She screamed incoherently and ripped at him with her nails.

But Niall would not let go. Could not. Like Orlaith, Casidhe, too, had never been baptized.

After several exhausting moments, Casidhe's struggles turned to heart-wrenching sobs. She clung to him desperately, seeking a comfort he could not offer. Then, as quickly as it began, it ended. Casidhe's grip relaxed and she drew a deep, quavering breath. Without a word, he helped his wife to her feet. They stared at each other.

"I . . . I could not . . ." Niall's voice broke and he buried his head in Casidhe's shoulder. She stroked his hair.

"I know," she whispered. "I know."

Release came at last in suffocating sobs.

Finished, he held her hand and led her to the hearth. Once she was sitting, he took her face in his hands, his heart dead, and said, "I need to do something. Wait here. Do you hear me? Wait here."

Casidhe nodded.

A man in a nightmare, Niall grabbed his coat and boots, pulled up the hood and went outside to get his shovel. Shovel in hand, he walked past Casidhe who stared at him through eyes that might never know joy again. He thrust aside the curtain to the nursery and walked to the cradle. As he stared down at the covered monster, rank with the smell of disease, fear and grief gave way at last to rage. He did not hate the thing that lay in the cradle, could not hate it. There was even a place, deep, deep in his heart that pitied the dead thing. It too had not had a choice. As he and his wife had not. As his baby had not.

Niall reached into the cradle with the shovel and lifted the dead thing out. Fighting back a wave of nausea, he carried the abomination out of the nursery.

When Casidhe saw what he carried on the shovel, she did not flinch. With a strength that humbled him, her jaw set and her back straightened.

Closing his eyes, Niall approached the fire. He drew a breath, then carefully lowered the thing into the flames.

They watched it burn. As the smoke from the pyre rose, it changed from white to gray before settling at last upon a sickly green. Niall gagged and turned away from the smell.

Behind him, Casidhe did not move. Staring into the blossoming flames, she appeared beyond their ability to affect. Niall walked over and sat down beside her. Neither said a word as the hungry flames went about their grisly work.

Later, after the rain ended and the flames dwindled, after the wind carried away the stench of burning disease, Casidhe, in a voice as flat as a river-worn stone, asked, "What will you do?"

Niall's eyes narrowed as he stared at the glowing red embers.

What would he do?

He would get his daughter back, he vowed to himself, a promise forged in grief and hate. He said nothing though, to his wife, and they fell asleep.

* * *

The trip to the small chapel outside of Ui Bairrche, where Orlaith was to have been baptized next month, was not an easy one. Two days and a night it had taken him, and Diarmada had borne him quickly—more quickly, truth be told, than was good for the aging mare. The pass through the Wicklow Mountains was difficult in the best of times, but with the melting snow and the storm, the threat of slides had been high and the trail all but impassable. Several times throughout the course of the couple days, for his own safety and the safety of Diarmada, Niall had been forced to dismount and lead the horse along a particularly treacherous stretch of trail. Another month and most of the ice and snow would be gone. Until then, the journey through the mountains held many perils.

Thirsty and cold and exhausted, Niall slid from the saddle with a groan.

"Such a strong girl," he said, stroking the mare's quivering neck. Niall quickly rubbed Diarmada down and tied her to a post. "I won't be long," he said gently, and turned to the

church.

The small stone church rose out of the rocky plateau like a half-buried relic and had done so for more than a hundred years. Like the ancient stone of the hills that surrounded it, the chapel was simple and unadorned. Only a small cross, etched above the doorway, gave any hint of what the spartan structure really was. Niall had always thought it an odd place to raise a chapel, so secluded and difficult to reach, but he had always felt at peace in this place, safe.

Until tonight. Stepping through the heavy wooden doors of the sanctuary, the smell of incense greeted him. Across from Niall, Father Eoghan lit a candle on the altar.

"They took her, Father," Niall rasped, collapsing to his knees.

"Niall?" the priest asked.

Niall nodded. Father Eoghan, who had presided over the church for as long as Niall had been coming, rushed to his side, fear and confusion clearly writ in the stark lines of the priest's weathered face. Carefully, Father Eoghan guided Niall to a seat on a bench at the back of the church.

"Water," the priest called. A moment later, a young boy in a red robe, his footfalls echoing hollowly through the stony expanse, brought a pitcher of water on a tray. "Drink," Father Eoghan said, handing Niall a glass of water.

Niall drank the glass down.

"Better," the priest said, eyes grave with concern. "Now, tell me; what has happened?"

Niall told his story.

The lines that mapped the priest's aged face deepened as Niall recounted his tale. When he finished, Father Eoghan sat very still, his eyes focused on something beyond Niall.

"Father?" Niall whispered.

Father Eoghan snapped his head around, startled out of his reverie. His green eyes softened at once. "Words cannot express my grief, my son. I pray the Lord—"

"I am going to get her back, Father."

The priest paused for a moment, and then raised his eyes. In silence, Father Eoghan seemed to plumb the depths of Niall's conviction, sought an answer to a question that Niall had never asked. Sought and found that answer.

"Do you know what it is you seek to undo? Truly?"

Niall shook his head. "No, not truly. Nor does it matter. They stole Orlaith, Father, and I will get her back. Before almighty God, I swear it. Will you help me?"

Eoghan closed his eyes and muttered something that Niall thought might have been a prayer under his breath. When he finished, he opened his eyes and said, "What would you ask of me?"

Niall breathed a small sigh of relief. "Thank you, Father."

"Do not thank me yet. I'm afraid I may be of precious little help. We . . . are urged not to look too closely at certain things. Do you understand?"

Niall nodded. He knew well the views of the Church on the 'Old Ways'. Knew too that Father Eoghan had seen many things in his days on the island. One did not grow up on the island and not see things.

"I need to know where they have taken her," Niall said quietly. "Which of the hills is Hollow?"

Father Eoghan shook his head. "Not that. If I knew, I would tell you, truly I would."

"Then tell me what you can, and I shall do the rest."

Eoghan drew a breath. "There is a legend," the priest began with obvious effort. "When

the children begin to disappear, the time of the Teind is at hand."

"Teind? I don't understand."

"The legend speaks of a meeting that takes place every seven years between Finvarra, King of the Otherworld, and . . . Satan. It is believed by some that if Finvarra does not pay a tribute, a Teind, every seven years to the powers of Hell, Satan shall rise and claim the Otherworld for his own."

"What kind of tribute?" he asked at last, over his fear.

Eoghan's eyes were filled with sorrow. "The tribute was to be paid in mortal souls."

"No."

"I am sorry, my son. Were she not so young, had we been able to baptize her... I am so very sorry."

"Tell me about this meeting place, Father. How do I reach it?"

Eoghan shook his head. "I do not know. No mortal man can know. But..."

Niall stared at the conflicted priest, urged him on.

"There is an old tale," he said at length, quietly, "told about a woman with a single white hand who lives in the valley to the north. Some believe that in the heart of the valley a very special tree, a birch tree, grows. Legend has it that it grows alone, amid a clearing of dead grass and stone, and that if you wait beneath that tree and pray to the hag of the valley, she may hear your plea, and answer. She loves gold, if the tales are to be believed, and it is said she knows... many things."

"Gold? I've no gold. And how do I find a single tree amidst the whole—"

The priest raised his hands. "At risk of my soul, I only tell you what I have heard. But hear me—there remains one more piece of the tale. It is believed, by those who are old enough and wise enough to know, that any man who enters the valley seeking the woman is never seen again."

Fear crawled up his throat like a spider as Niall closed his eyes and prayed to God for strength. He did not know how he would get the gold to pay the woman, or how he would find the tree. But he had what he had come for. A chance. When he opened his eyes, he stared at the priest. "Thank you, Father," he said. Then, "Pray for us." Niall nodded once, before rising to take his leave.

As he turned, the priest sighed. "If you still insist on going through with this," Eoghan called in the voice of a man resigned to a decision, "perhaps there is one thing more I might do for you. For Orlaith. Come with me."

And Niall followed the priest.

Later, when he at last took his leave of the chapel, the machine awkward and heavy across his back, the small glass tube secured in his pouch and nestled beside the vial of holy water, it was with a sense of overwhelming awe. And a feeling of hope he thought he might never know again.

II

The wind through the trees was a shaft of ice. It lanced through the wolf-skin hide of his coat to settle deeply in his bones. The exposed skin of his face was scoured raw, and his hands

on Diarmada's reins ached with cold. Upon entering the woods, Niall had tried over and again to light his torch, but the Powers of the forest, ancient before the Word was made manifest in the Son almost nine-hundred-years ago, would not allow fire. No sooner would the flame begin to rise, and with it his hope for blessed warmth, than it would be extinguished by something that was more than the wind.

The worn leather harness that fastened the machine to his back had grown hard and jagged enough cut into the side of his neck and shoulder, and the bronze nozzle clanged dully against the small canister and echoed through the woods. A light mist, musty, damp and cloying, rose from the valley floor and sought to obscure the surrounding pine and alder. High above, the haunting light of the moon was strangled by the twisting branches of the highland forest, leaving Niall to wend his way through a labyrinth of shadow.

More than the wind and the cold, though, more than the silver moon and its shadows, the thing that frightened Niall most was the silence that surrounded him. No birds called from the darkness, no animal stirred. It was as if he and Diarmada, uncharacteristically skittish beneath him, were alone in the woods.

"Easy, girl," he whispered, stroking the mare's chestnut mane. "Nothing out here but trees." He was lying of course, knew full well that the primeval shadows hid things mortal men had feared for centuries.

They steal children in the night.

His father's words, spoken on a winter's night many years ago, as Niall lay half asleep in his bed. He had only ever told the story to one person, and Casidhe had listened quietly as he awoke from his nightmare and spoke the fear of his heart. Then she had held him and they had made love and the past had seemed very far away.

Not so far now, as he recalled that night with a clarity that frightened him. His mother had come to him first that terrible night, summoned by Niall's screams. He never forgot, would never forget, the look of fear on his mother's face as she rushed into his room.

His father, Connall, had stayed by the doorway as his mother came to him, eyes scanning the darkness of Niall's room.

"Oh, my dear," his mother said, stroking his face and hair, "Niall, what is it?"

"Eyes," he whispered, pushing deeply into the warm haven of her embrace, "eyes in the night. They...were watching me." Even amid the shadows of his room, Niall had seen his father's shoulders and back stiffen, saw his head turn toward the window. His father had left then, as his mother hugged him and sang him a song. When Connall returned, he held an iron crucifix in his hand. A small string dangled from the top of the cross, and with a hammer and a nail, his father had hung the Crucifix upon the wall above Niall's bed.

The same crucifix Niall had hung, so very carelessly, above Orlaith's cradle.

When his father finished, he looked down at Niall and told him that he need never again fear the eyes in the dark.

"The Lord God is looking down on you now," Connall O'Callaghan said that night. "And evil dare not enter His Sight." Then his mother and father had stayed with him until they thought he was asleep. As they left his room, he heard his mother whisper, "Connall, what was it? What did he see?"

"The Fey Folk," his father whispered in answer, his words cold with fear. "They steal children in the night. Sometimes they leave something behind, something wicked and cruel. They think it is a joke, stealing children. But the cross will protect him, and come spring, we will take him to the chapel in Ui Bairrche where he will be baptized."

His mother had started to speak, but his father interrupted. "It matters not what we believe, Fianna. Things change. That cross, this new God, they have power. They will keep him safe."

He cracked his eyes open and saw his parents standing in the doorway staring at him. They stared for long moments before they turned and left his room.

Niall had never forgotten that night, had kept that cross close to him every day of his life. And then he had passed it on to his daughter, that it might protect her, as it had protected him.

Niall knew it was not the cross that failed. Knew too, that he would make amends.

He cleared his throat and cried, "I seek the Woman With the White Hand." As his voice trailed off into darkness, he reached back with his hand to stroke the bronze canister. "I have a gift."

Niall had entered the forest with no real idea how to find the woman, knew that he could spend weeks, months or more, scouring the valley, blindly searching for a single tree. He did not have months, and so he had decided upon the most direct method he could think of. He only hoped it worked.

The wind grew still at his words, and the rising mist eddied. Beneath him, Diarmada nervously shuffled her feet. Niall's heart thundered against his breast, and his white breath was loud amid the depths of the silence.

"Do you hear?" he called again, louder. "I bear a gift for—"

The creature rose from the depths of the mist like an apparition, or a corpse.

"God in Heaven," Niall whispered, crossing himself.

It was tall, with a man's legs and arms, a man's chest. It was not a man. Covered in thick, matted fur, the massive tines of its antlers branching high overhead, the creature was an overpowering presence, a testament to the Powers that had ruled this place since the world was young. Covered in places with clumps of grass and dirt, it stank of wet fur and rotting earth, and stared at Niall through eyes of liquid jet. The intelligence behind those eyes staggered and frightened him. Diarmada's legs stiffened beneath him and she trembled. He had no words to comfort her, not here, in this place so far from the world he knew.

Before him, with great solemnity, its unblinking gaze never leaving Niall, the beast raised its arm and pointed toward the forest. Fighting free of the creature's gaze, Niall turned to follow that outstretched arm. Where it pointed, the fog eddied and shifted, formed a gossamer tunnel through mist and shadow.

Niall turned back to the beast in time to see the mists of the forest rise and swallow it as though it had been nothing more substantial than a dream. Or a nightmare.

For long moments, Niall stared at the ethereal passage. Then, with a snap of the reins, he urged Diarmada on.

His daughter was waiting.

* * *

Wet leaves, remnants of an autumn passed, described a path over sodden earth, between trees and branches that seemed to shift behind their moon-mist shroud. The rich, earthy smells of the forest, so familiar, so soothing, enveloped him, sought to convince him that this really was just a forest, that he had not left the world and everything he knew of it far behind.

Niall was not deceived. He had lived his whole life in the woods. First with his father and mother, learning to work wood and metal, then with Casidhe, who had taught him...so

many things. He had come to recognize the sounds and smells and movements of the forest as intimately as he recognized his home. Casidhe had always been cleverer, it was true, but Niall knew the forest as well as any man. Though he recognized much of what surrounded him, instincts honed over the course of a lifetime screamed at him, warned him there was something more, something lurking beyond the welcoming façade. Clutching the reins tightly in one hand, Niall reached out and stroked Diarmada's quivering neck. The beast was terrified. Niall imagined that on almost any other day, he would have been equally frightened.

But they stole his daughter and he would have her back.

Their journey through the spectral mists stretched for an indefinable time. The bitter cold; the soft plodding of Diarmada's hooves on the wet ground; the sighing wind through alder and pine that carried the foul smell of decay; the eyes, red and gleaming, glimpsed sidelong, only half-seen through the fog. It would be these things that Niall would always remember, these things that would forever define for him his time in the Otherworld.

These things, and the tree.

It grew alone amid a sea of dead grass and half-buried rock at the center of a large clearing. Like a desiccated hand, the tree rose from the black earth of the forest to scratch and claw at the night sky. The fog flowed calmly around it, like a stream around a stone. Wispy tendrils stretched languorously toward the tree's gnarled white bark, but refused to touch its spindly, leafless branches. From the edge of the clearing, eyes narrowed, Niall scanned the surrounding gloom. Beneath him, Diarmada grew rigid with fear. Carefully, Niall slid from the saddle.

"Damn," he muttered, as his foot sank halfway to his knee in a puddle of cold, decomposing muck. Careful not to lose his boot, Niall pried his foot loose and tethered Diarmada to a small tree, then entered the clearing and approached the tree.

He had never seen a birch so large. Its branches were a spider's web of complexity. Niall stopped several paces away from the tree and raised his voice. "I have come to speak to the Woman With the White Hand. My name is Niall O'Callaghan, and I bring a gift. I pray thee, Lady, answer the call of your humble servant." Niall's words echoed through the woods as he awaited a reply.

None came.

"I am Niall O'Callaghan," he called again, louder. "I bear a gift for the Woman With the White Hand. I beg thee, mistress of the valley, whose name is spoken even in the house of the new god, hear my plea and answer my call."

Again Niall's words echoed through the heavy stillness of the forest without reply.

Had the creature in the mist lied to him? Led him down the wrong path? Niall's heart raced. He had been allowed to reach this place, he knew, and was not so foolish as to think otherwise. Niall was here because the Powers that ruled the forest wanted him here. But what if the reason they brought him here differed from Niall's own reasons for being here? What if they didn't care about his offer? Niall had assumed they would at least let him speak, that the woman would at least hear him before she decided whether or not to accept his offer. What had led him to such an assumption? Pride, perhaps? Hope, more likely. And need. More than anything, it had been a father's need that made such thoughts seem rational. It had always been possible, of course—likely, even, were he completely honest with himself, and given the size of his task—that he would fail. A thought he had refused to credit, but now, gazing about the clearing, feeling more alone than he had ever felt in all his life, his assumption, his belief that such a task could be done, seemed incomprehensible in its stupidity. And for the first time since

he entered the woods, he wondered if this task was beyond him.

Then the forest spoke and there was no more room for doubt.

"And how shall I answer?" The voice was the sound of wind through dry leaves, brittle and hard.

Niall spun. Frantically, he searched the gloom. He saw nothing save Diarmada's wide, terror-filled gaze. He turned back to the tree and drew a breath.

"Lady," he said, "I have come to ask a boon. In exchange for your aid, I offer you this wondrous machine that will allow you to change water into gold."

Silence. Then, "Gold?" The word was carried on the wind.

Inwardly, Niall breathed a sigh of relief. "Yes," he said.

"Show me."

Niall shook his head. "First, you must answer my questions, then I shall make gold for you."

Once again, silence fell like moonlight upon the clearing. For a terrifying moment Niall wondered if she would answer. Then the Woman With the White Hand stepped from behind the tree.

The first thing he noticed was the gold. Utterly at odds with her filthy gray robe, the woman was bedecked in gold. Necklaces and chains; rings; bracelets around wrist and bare ankles. Her gold glistened in the soft moonlight of the clearing, sought to draw the eye away from the woman who wore it. The hood of the woman's robe was pulled up and her head was bowed so Niall could not see her face. The tattered remains of the robe hung loosely on her hunched, skeletal frame, and the left sleeve, devoid of an arm, fluttered lightly in the cold wind. Her right hand jutted from the end of her frayed sleeve like a spider. The ringed fingers, impossibly long with joints like knots in wood, were the same death-white as the bark of the tree and stroked the huge birch with all the gentleness of a lover. She did not look up as she spoke.

"Ask your questions, mortal man," she hissed.

Niall clung to the image of the thing that slept in the cradle where his baby should have slept. Rage strangled his fear.

"I wish to know of the Teind, Lady. When does Finvarra meet with the Devil, and where shall the Teind be paid?"

The woman's single hand continued to caress the tree. "Clever man. Knows so many things, he does. Come closer," she said, tilting her head to the side like an animal seeking a scent.

Niall shifted the machine on his back, reached behind and grabbed the nozzle attached by a long tube to the canister. Then, slowly, he took another step forward.

"Closer," the woman urged, "let me touch you, let me lay my hand upon your heart that I might know the truth of your words."

"I am close enough. If you would have the truth and my machine, tell me of the Teind."

"The seven-year is up and the tribute has come due. At the next full-moon, Finvarra will lead his captives from the Hollow Hills to the place where the Devil waits."

Niall looked to the sky. The moon was bright and waxing. Three nights would see it full. Three nights until Orlaith would be lost to him forever amid the fires of Hell.

No. Never.

"Where does he wait, hag? Where does the Devil wait?"

"Where he always waits."

Niall ground his teeth. At his sides, his hands balled into fists as hard as bone.

"Ah, the man grows angry." At her words, the branches of the ancient tree began to sway. "Tell me, angry man, why do you seek that which no man in ten thousand years has ever seen?"

He would not speak Orlaith's name in this place, would not have this creature know his daughter's name.

"Someone was stolen from you, no? A child? Was it a girl? Did the thief leave you a gift in exchange for the life of your child?" The woman's laughter fell from the air like shards of glass.

"Where do they meet?" he asked quietly.

"Do you think you are the first to seek the meeting place? So many fathers over the centuries, filled with pain and wrath."

His patience at an end, Niall raged, "Where do they meet?"

"Come closer," she hissed over the echo of his words and the creaking of the branches, tilting her head again in that peculiar manner she had, "and I shall tell you."

"Tell me," Niall answered slowly, staring at the woman and holding his ground, "or I shall leave and you shall never see my machine again."

Still she did not raise her head, and Niall at last understood. His heart beating quickly, he added, "Then you shall be left wearing the tarnished fool's gold that hangs from your neck and fingers like so much cheap tinsel."

His barb was rewarded. Her shift forward was subtle, would likely have gone unnoticed were he not watching for some sign. A stillness descended upon her then—did he dare name it doubt?—and her hand, though still in contact with the tree, stopped moving.

"Tarnished?" she whispered, her head rising slightly as though to better hear his answer.

"Certainly," Niall said, as if it were the most obvious thing in the world. "Surely you can see for yourself that it is not real gold?"

The woman ducked back a step, quickly, muttering to herself, her head shifting rapidly from side to side.

She could not see it, of course—the woman was blind.

When she finished talking to herself, the Woman With the White Hand stepped forward. "Your gold," she said, her voice pleading, "it is real gold?"

"It is the finest gold in all the world. It shall make you sparkle like the most beautiful star." Niall took a step forward. As he did, he stumbled on one of the many half-buried stones scattered throughout the clearing. He cursed inwardly his own clumsiness, and looked down at the offending stone.

Not a stone.

A skull.

Niall recoiled, the nozzle clanging loudly against the canister on his back. Realization was a lightning bolt. So many fathers over the centuries, filled with pain and wrath. Niall fought back a wave of nausea that threatened to undo him. The fathers...

Niall understood at last why the Powers of the forest had brought him here, understood at last who this woman truly was.

She leaned forward again, waiting.

Niall gathered himself, fought back the sense of loathing that rose like bile in his breast. "Tell me, Lady," he asked a final time, reaching desperately for calm, "where do they meet?"

Diarmada shuffled behind him. Niall turned in time to see shadows, darker than the surrounding gloom, shift at the edges of the forest.

He did not have much time.

"If I tell you," the woman said, "you will leave your machine?"

Niall turned back to the woman. "Yes."

"They meet at Aedh Errigal," she said. "Now, the machine."

Niall closed his eyes. Aedh Errigal. Relief that swept through his body, brought him near to tears. He whispered a prayer of thanks to God, then carefully lifted the machine from his back and placed it on the ground. Behind him, the darkness stirred.

"What are you doing?" the woman asked.

What, indeed? Earlier, before he entered the forest and left the world he had always known so very far behind, everything seemed simple. He would enter the forest, find the woman and learn what he needed to learn. And now, miraculously, he had learned what he needed to learn, and all that was left was to leave this place. Could this really work?

With a trembling hand, Niall pulled the bronze nozzle free from the clamp that bound it and the length of tube to the body of the canister. Despite the cold, his hands were slick with sweat. "I am preparing the machine," Niall said as calmly as he could, turning the small wheel at the top of the canister. The machine emitted a dull hiss as the liquids within swirled and mixed.

Behind him, he sensed the darkness drawing closer. They had come for him of course, to ensure he never left the clearing, to ensure he, and the secret that was now his, joined those half-buried fathers beneath the dead grass. For the Woman With the White Hand was the protector of that secret, and no one else could be suffered to possess it. Niall had been led here, just as the others had been led here for years that stretched into centuries.

That which no man in ten thousand years has ever seen.

No one, ever, would have left. Looking at the woman, Niall thought of all the lost children in all the centuries, thought of the fathers, driven by love or rage to this dark place in the hope of finding an answer to their grief. His hands stopped trembling and the tears began to fall. So many lost.

He would not be one of them. But he would make answer. For the fathers and mothers and children, he would make the forest pay.

Niall lifted the nozzle and pointed it at the tree.

The Woman With the White Hand sniffed the air.

"It was a child," Niall said quietly, planting his feet firmly in the damp earth. "A girl. And I will take her back."

Then Niall turned his head and flipped the small switch atop the nozzle and unleashed Armageddon.

* * *

"In 678," Father Eoghan had begun, "the Byzantine Emperor, Constantine IV, faced his gravest threat." The aged priest led Niall through a labyrinth of passageways deep beneath the old church until they reached a particular chamber. The chamber harbored two crates, one large and one small. In the larger of the crates, a bronze canister had rested.

"Caliph Moawiya led his Saracen forces to Byzantium and laid siege to the capital. For five years, the Caliph's fleet blockaded the great city. The Empire might well have fallen that day, were it not for the able precautions of the Emperor, and the deployment of his greatest weapon." Father Eoghan lifted his head and looked at Niall. "They say it burned on water, that it devoured ships whole, and that once started, it could not be extinguished."

Niall stared at the bronze canister.

"They called it Roman Fire, and the secrets of its creation have been lost to time. When you turn the wheel at the top, the liquids inside the canister are mixed. All that's left then is to raise the nozzle, flip the small switch and watch as the flames of Hell destroy whatever is in their path."

Niall could think of nothing to say.

"You are wondering how the Church has come into possession of such a hideous device, no?"

Niall nodded, dumbly.

"After the near defeat by the Saracens, Constantine was afraid that a time would come when he would be unable to defend the Church he fought so hard to unify. He wanted to ensure that the Church had the means to defend itself. Constantine was a close friend to Donus, who was Pope at the time. In a secret meeting, Constantine revealed the secret of Roman Fire to Donus."

"And Donus," Niall said, "was then able to create his own Roman Fire?"

"So that the Church could be defended," Eoghan finished. "However, one year later, St. Agatho was named as Donus's successor. When he became aware that the Church was in possession of the most hideous weapon the world had ever seen, he forbade its use, decreeing its creation went against the Laws of Church and God. St. Agatho named the weapon the Devil's Breath, and destroyed the secret formula. But secrets have a way of surviving, Niall, even when we wish them dead."

"But why is this here? What possible use could it be? Surely this small chapel, secluded in the mountains, is safe enough."

"Perhaps," Father Eoghan had said. "And perhaps there is more to this small chapel than you first thought."

Then Father Eoghan reached for the second crate.

* * *

A tremendous, deafening roar that sucked the air from Niall's lungs, and Roman Fire erupted from the nozzle like dragon's breath. For an instant, the smell of sulfur and quicklime and something else that Niall could not quite identify burned his eyes and nose. Clutching the nozzle in a death-grip, he turned his head, eyes and teeth clenched. He knew if he let up for even a moment, the tube and nozzle would flail wildly, and the Fire would indiscriminately destroy anything in its path. Both arms quivered with the effort of keeping the shuddering nozzle pointed as far away from him as possible.

Not even his own straining effort or the roar of the Fire could drown out the woman's scream. Her cries, stiletto sharp, spiraled outward from the tree until they filled the clearing, then the forest, and finally the world. He thought the sound might drive him mad.

Striving to keep madness at bay, Niall bent all his will to the task of clutching the nozzle and withstanding the searing, staggering heat. Even as he fought to keep control of the rapidly heating nozzle, Niall felt the hair and skin on the back of his hands begin to burn, felt sweat drip down his face and chest. Suddenly his wolf-skin cloak became unbearable, and Niall wanted nothing more than to tear it off. Behind him Diarmada cried out, struggling against her tether. He added his own screams to the chaos of the night.

Niall's hands began to blister when eternity passed and the woman's screams finally ended. In desperation, he flipped the switch and the stream of Fire cut off. Silence ground him

to his knees. Panting, Niall let the nozzle slide from his damaged grasp. It hissed as it struck the damp ground. A moment later, he opened his eyes.

To behold Hell on Earth.

"God above," Niall whispered.

The tree was a conflagration, a tower of creaking, groaning flame. It lit the clearing and the surrounding forest like the sun on a cloudless day, and all around him, wind-blown ash fell to the ground like grizzled snowflakes. And while the smell of charred wood hung heavy in the air, there was something more, something that lay beneath that familiar scent. Niall recognized the diseased stench and gagged. He thought back to the thing in the cradle and knew that for as long as he lived he would never forget it.

A sound from behind pulled him out of the abyss of memory.

Niall turned. "No," he whispered. "Please, Lord, not like this . . ."

Behind him, an avalanche of shadow surged into the clearing from the edges of the forest. In the harsh orange light of the burning tree, the shadows stood revealed as monsters, half-men, creatures from myth and nightmare.

They flowed around Diarmada and came straight for him.

Niall scrambled on hands and knees through the muck and leaves, his red, blistered hands screaming in pain as he sought desperately to avoid their approach. Then he huddled in the mud, closed his eyes and prayed.

An advancing army, Niall heard them trample the ground all around him, felt the cold splash of sodden earth at their passing. The stench of death, of things dying and dead, clung to them as they passed. He thought of Orlaith and Casidhe and Father Eoghan, of all the other fathers who had died in this place. Of all those who had failed.

And then, like a fading storm, the footsteps were past him and Niall cast aside his morbid thoughts and opened his eyes.

The horde had passed him by almost as though he no longer mattered. A moment later, as they gathered around the burning tree, he realized he didn't. To them, all that mattered was the tree.

In silent awe, he stared on as more and more of the forest's creatures huddled around the blazing tree. When the stream of shadows at last ended, they knelt down and began to chant quiet words in a language Niall had ever heard before. But, as they chanted, the flames began to lessen. Soon, Niall realized with a surge of panic, they would be extinguished.

His ruined hands making an ordeal of the task, Niall quickly got to his feet and replaced the canister on his back. The Fire secured, he rushed toward Diarmada. Untying the horse, he clambered awkwardly into the saddle. Niall knew he should just go, fly from the clearing and forest as quickly as Diarmada could carry him.

An image of Orlaith flashed through his mind and from the back of the tall mare, he turned a final time to the tree.

But for a few burning branches, the flames were nearly extinguished. Then, as though sensing his gaze, a number of shadows that ringed the tree turned to him.

Niall recognized the hatred in their eyes.

He wondered if they recognized the hatred in his.

"This is for the children," he whispered, and, ignoring the pain in his hands, he turned from the tree and pointed the nozzle toward the forest. Staring at the wide-eyed shadows, he flipped the switch.

Once again, Roman Fire spewed forth into the night. But this time, it was the forest itself

that burned.

Over the sizzle and crackle of flames, the monsters screamed. Many of them flocked to the edge of the clearing and began chanting anew. More and more shadows joined them in their efforts to fight back the hungry flames.

Niall continued his onslaught, spraying the Devil's Breath in all directions until at last, his rage spent, the Fire sputtered and exhausted itself. Gasping for breath, Niall surveyed the scene. All around him, trees and bushes burned, but, just as quickly, the shadows chanted and battled the blazes.

"Go," Niall said, shrugging out of the infernal machine. "Go!"

And driving his heels hard into Diarmada's flanks, he made for the safety of the distant mountains.

Behind him the Powers of the Night fought to keep their forest from burning.

III

"Good girl," Niall whispered, patting Diarmada's hanging head. The horse was thirsty and exhausted from their break-neck dash through the forest. Many times Niall had had the feeling something was behind them, gaining, gaining. But furtive glances behind showed only the flickering glow of fires in a place where fire was never meant to be. Even still, he drove Diarmada harder than he ever had before. She had responded, miraculously hurtling through darkness and over the uneven ground of the woods as though guided by the hand of God. A comforting thought, that.

But her wide-eyed, trembling form told the story of the price she paid for her bravery. She did not have much left. As they reached the top of the mountain pass that would eventually see them home, Niall dismounted and, after rubbing her down and letting her know how proud he was of her, he let Diarmada graze on the wild grass that grew sporadically along the trail.

While Diarmada grazed, there was something he needed to do.

He tied the mare to a tall stone and wandered for a time off the path. In the darkness, the broken ground, strewn about with slick mud and lichen-covered stones, was treacherous. The heady smell of primroses and heather was thick in the early spring air, and hundreds of shamrocks grew on the ground beneath his feet. Behind him, Diarmada snuffled as she grazed, and her hooves pawed the scree that formed the path. He drew a breath and pressed on. Not much further. When he reached the cliff face a few minutes later, he looked up.

Scarred by lightning six years past, the ancient rowan protruded from the side of the mountain like a splintered bone. Parts of the tree's roots were exposed, and a portion of the brown bark was blackened where the lightning had struck.

Not everything had to be told to him. Some things you just learned by listening when nobody thought you were listening, or by simply living your life. Niall could not have said how he knew about rowan wood. Perhaps his father had mentioned it once, or someone in the market, or the tavern. Perhaps he had heard it in a story or a song. In the end it didn't matter how he knew. That he did know was enough.

Niall looked up at the towering cliff face, then down at his injured hands. Many of the blisters had broken, and even in the darkness he could see his hands were sticky and red and

swollen. Gritting his teeth, he tore several thin strips from the end of his shirt and wrapped them as tightly as pain would allow around the palms of his hands. He had to have his fingers clear, no matter how much they hurt. Then, glancing upward, he reached for the wall and began his ascent.

The pain in his hands was appalling. Each time he reached up to grasp the jagged rock was like clenching shards of glass in his fist. The small holds where his hands found purchase quickly became blood-slick and gleamed black beneath the light of the waxing moon. Already blood began to soak through his makeshift bandages, but, without the limited protection they offered him, Niall doubted he could have made the climb at all. As a boy growing up in his father's smithy, Niall had experienced his share of burns and scrapes, and as he grew and began to work metal and wood on his own, the pain of burns and scrapes had become almost commonplace.

The pain that flared up both his arms and was manifest in the path of bloody handprints that stretched below him was anything but commonplace.

When he at last reached the small plateau where the tree grew, his chest ached and his breath exploded from his lungs in heaving white gasps. Carefully, blood making each small move a terrible risk, Niall clambered up to the ledge and leaned with his back against the mountain as he gathered his breath. Resting his burning hands in his lap, Niall stared at the tree.

It had long been widely held that rowan was sacred to the Otherworld, that the wood was said to be home to spirits fey and dark. What was less widely known was that the Hanging Rowan, the kind that grew free of the constraints and spirits of the earth, was (perhaps because of its freedom, Niall surmised), anathema to the Otherworld.

At least that's the tale the stories told. Staring at the wounded tree, Niall hoped with all his heart that the stories were true. He leaned forward. The thought of pulling the knife from his belt, of holding it in his burned hand and wielding it, was daunting. He sighed and drew the blade. Gritting his teeth, he quickly hacked through a large branch that stretched out over the ledge. When he finished, he sheathed the blade, its hilt sticky with blood, and picked up the piece of wood. It felt solid in his hands, and gave him an odd sense of security.

Anathema. He prayed it was true, would need it to be true when, in less than three days' time, he faced the King and the Devil. Niall dropped the branch over the side of the ledge, then carefully began to make his way down the side of the cliff. Familiarity with some of the holds should have made going down easier than going up, but the pain of his bleeding hands made the descent arduous. When he could no longer stand the pain, Niall jumped free of the wall. Much higher than he would normally have been when jumping clear, he landed hard, twisting his ankle. He fought down a curse. Gripping his injured ankle in one hand, he gathered the length of branch with the other. The ankle didn't feel broken at least, as much as the pain screamed otherwise. When he felt ready, he used the severed branch as a crutch to help him rise, then he hobbled along to find Diarmada waiting contentedly by the side of the path.

His hands and ankle made mounting the horse awkward, but on the third try he made it. Sore, and more exhausted than he could ever remember feeling, Niall whispered, "Home, girl."

He was almost ready.

* * *

Holding the rowan staff in his right hand, he stared out the door at the winding trail that

led through the forest. That would bear him at last, to an ending.

"The sun will set soon," Niall said quietly. Beside him, Casidhe squeezed his hand and said nothing. Niall turned to her, but she did not meet his gaze.

Could it really be four years since he had first seen her at the festival of Dub Siban? When he had first heard her sing? In all that time, her beauty had never failed to stop his heart. But when he arrived back home, bloody and sore, three days past, Niall had been staggered by Casidhe's appearance. It had been clear she had not slept in all the time he had been gone, had not eaten any more than her body deemed absolutely necessary. The milky white of her skin had been replaced by a dull gray, and her eyes no longer glittered with the joy of life. On top of that, she was still not wholly recovered from the effects of bringing Orlaith kicking and screaming into the world only a couple weeks past. The sight of her was almost more than he could bear. She had always been a fighter. Casidhe had been a singer before they met, and though most singers—especially good ones—were held in high esteem and were well respected, a woman who traveled the roads and visited tavern after tavern had to learn to take care of herself.

As she silently led him into the house and bound his wounds, wrapping layers of bandages around his blistered palms while leaving his damaged fingers free to do the work they would need to do, she seemed to have no fight left. When Niall could no longer stand the silence, he reached out to her and Casidhe stumbled brokenly into his embrace. They held each other for a long time.

After that, Niall had made them a small meal and they ate and talked. He spoke of the woman and the Fire, of the Teind and the rowan.

When he mentioned the rowan, she looked up. "Oak, birch and rowan," she said simply. The look in her eyes was one Niall could not identify. He nodded, uncomprehending.

"The trees, they are three in number."

Niall blinked, was set to have her explain when it came to him. She had always been cleverer than he. It was not the trees that were significant, but the number. Oak, birch and rowan. Three. The number of God. He stared at his wife. Neither voiced the silent hope that echoed in their hearts.

When they were finished eating, he told her of his plan to get their daughter back.

Later that night, they both slept well, huddled in each other's arms for the first time in days.

The next morning, utilizing the skills taught to him so long ago by his father, Niall began work on the staff. It was not a masterpiece, was, in truth, wholly unimpressive. Five feet long, the shaft was covered in rough, facet-like planes that would have taken too long to smooth. At the top of the rounded handle he had carved a small cross, and burned into the side of the staff with a hot iron was a single name—Orlaith. He stared at the blackened name that would have to be enough until he held his daughter in his hands once more.

Because of the pain in his hands, and the bandages, it had taken him much longer than usual to carve the staff. Rough as it was, it had still taken him most of the day and night to complete. The following morning he rose early and, making use of the remaining wood, had fashioned a pair of arrows. He fletched the arrows with hawk feathers, and in the shafts he again burned his daughter's name.

The Otherworld would never forget Orlaith. Niall would not let them.

Though smaller, the arrows had been much more difficult, much more painful, to carve. They required a precision he could forego with the staff. Working the lungs of his forge, Niall had been ready to melt two small blocks of iron to use for the heads when Casidhe came to him.

"Use this," she said.

And handed him the Crucifix.

Niall stared at her. Her gaze, as hard and unyielding as the iron cross, did not waver. He nodded his head.

By the afternoon of the third day the cross was melted and the heads were tempered and fixed to the shafts.

Almost time for him to go.

Standing at the door, holding Casidhe's hand as the sun continued to set in the western sky, Niall stared at the thin curtain that hid the nursery, imagined the bare place on the wall where the cross had hung above his sleeping child, and thought of the arrows and their heads of blessed iron.

He shook his head and prayed it would be enough. He felt Casidhe's hand tremble in his grasp, felt her turn to him. Niall looked down on her and kissed her, and she closed her eyes.

"How is it," she whispered, burying her head in his chest, "that I can watch you do this thing, all alone, and at the same moment wish with all my heart that you would not? Am I mad?"

Niall held her tighter. He understood the fears that raged in her breast. She wanted him to stay, but could not live with the thought that he might not go.

He understood all too well; the same fears were alive in him, eating away at his courage and hope.

"Mad? Of course you are mad. Had you continued to sing, you could have been a partner by now in some famous troupe. You could have been wealthy beyond your dreams. But instead you chose me. The very height of madness!"

He felt her body shake against his, but didn't know if she laughed or cried.

"I will be back before the sun rises on another day," he whispered close to her ear. "God is with me, Casidhe. I am never alone."

"No," she answered quietly, "Never, ever alone. I shall hold you to your promise."

Niall embraced her for a moment, fought back the tears that longed to fall. So much pain, enough to swallow them both forever. He released her and she stepped aside and turned away. It was shame, Niall knew, that prevented her from watching him leave, for even as she urged him on, she knew well that she might have been urging him to his death. That she could feel such things was one of the many reasons he loved her so very much.

As he reached the door, he stopped a final time. "I swear I shall not fail you," he vowed to the empty room.

And then he was gone.

IV

Niall reached the outskirts of Aedh Errigal as the sun dipped below the rubicund horizon. The moon had yet to show itself in the twilit sky, but when it did, it would show full and its stark brilliance would bathe the grassy slopes in its argent glow.

From his place at the edge of the thinning forest, Niall overlooked the grassland valley. Thick with burgeoning gorse and heather, the valley nestled between Aedh Errigal and its

twin neighbour, Glenatuathail. Each of the hills had gentle, deliberate slopes that tapered off in rounded peaks no more than forty feet above the floor of the valley, and blended into other, surrounding hills, both larger and smaller. As far back as Niall could remember he had heard legends about this place. Many believed it haunted, full of ghosts and secrets that mortal man was never meant to know. Others claimed that on certain nights, the creatures of the Otherworld would appear carrying their gold as they crisscrossed from hill to hill in straight lines, forming an unholy cat's cradle in the darkness.

Niall laid his bow upon the soft ground and from the pack he carried across his shoulder pulled out the arrows and laid them beside the bow. Then, for what seemed like the hundredth time, he reached down to the small pouch fastened at his waist. He could feel the vial and the tube through the soft leather. In his right hand, he clutched his staff.

He was as ready as any man could possibly be. Now all he had to do was wait.

* * *

It was well past the dead of night, the full moon high overhead, when Glenatuathail trembled and it began.

Niall had lain hidden among the tall grasses that bordered the edge of the woods for many hours, and with each passing hour his fear mounted. Fear that the woman had lied to him, that, as he lay there, waiting, his daughter—along with how many others?—was being sacrificed to Hell. The thought urged him to run headlong into the valley, begged him to scream Orlaith's name from the very peaks of the haunted hills. Instead, he had lain there, waiting. The hours spent at the edge of that forest had been the longest, most torturous hours of his life.

As the hill began to quiver and the music started, Niall almost wept with relief. The old woman had spoken truth. His heart raced with renewed hope—and more than a touch of lingering fear. His attention riveted on the hill, Niall pushed himself into a crouch and watched.

Breathtaking music emanated from somewhere deep inside the earth. Plaintive and haunting, the music wove of the night a surreal tapestry. Niall's eyes began to close as he listened. The Otherworldly music grew louder, more insistent as it filled more and more of the night. Like the fingers of an unseen hand, it seemed to draw nearer, to reach out to him, call to him. Slowly, he began slipping away, as though he were dangling over the edge of a cliff and the branch to which he clung was breaking. Gripping his staff tightly, he ground his bandaged palms and burned fingers into the wooden shaft, distantly aware of the pain this caused. What was happening to him? Where was he? The music, so seductive, as though he had waited his whole life to hear it. He wanted—needed—to answer its call.

As his hands continued to mechanically work the length of the staff, his fingers brushed against the letters burned into its rowan shaft.

"Orlaith!" he cried, shrugging off the siren call of the music. His eyes sprang open.

Just in time to witness the splitting of the hill.

It was as though one of the Fomorian Giants of legend had swung its massive blade and, with a single sideways stroke, severed the top of Glenatuathail completely through. But the hill did not bleed as a man did; rather, it bled light, brilliant, blinding light. Niall raised a hand to shield his narrowed eyes and through the cracks in his trembling fingers watched as the hillside grass stretched and tore and the top of the mountain began to rise.

Aside from the soft rasp of tumbling dirt and loosened stone, the rounded peak made no sound as it rose, effortlessly separating itself from the much larger base of the hill. From

the space between base and peak, white, dazzling light spread, flooding the valley. The peak continued its slow, impossible rise for several seconds before it stopped and hung, perhaps twice the height of a man, above the base. Somewhere inside the hill the music continued to play, but Niall was now beyond its reach. He would not think about how close the music had come to ending his quest forever.

Niall slung his bow across his back and grabbed his arrows; then he shuffled forward and ducked behind a small tree, among the last offered by the forest. From behind the shelter of the budding hazel, Niall watched as the hosts of the Otherworld strode forth from the manifest bowels of the Hollow Hill.

"The Rade," Niall whispered, crossing himself. Though old fears made him long to turn aside, Niall forced himself to look on. He had first heard the song when he was a child. And though he had long since forgotten many of the words, there were some that he remembered still:

> "And when the Rade, in all its glory rides,
> turn your head and seek the shadows;
> better not to know the secret that it hides."

Horrified, Niall now knew the secret of the Rade.

Silhouettes at first, the solemn procession issued from the heart of the white light. And at the head of the procession, leading his gathered hosts down the side of Glenatuathail toward the valley floor, was Finvarra, the king. Crowned with a circlet of gold, the king sat the most beautiful mount Niall had ever seen. The black steed, darker than a starless night, glistened in the light of the Otherworld, its eyes sparkling red as though the spirit of the beast was flame. It carried the king with a grace no mortal steed could hope to match. The king himself was tall and thin and armored in gold. Behind him, his great green cape, trimmed in white fur, rippled softly, and in his left hand he brandished a staff of gold. Beneath the flowing red of Finvarra's hair, Niall could see the pointed tips of his ears.

Behind Finvarra rode his queen, Oonaugh, the most beautiful creature in all the worlds. The sight of her stilled Niall's heart. She was enchanting, perfect. The white of her gown, the fall of her flaming hair . . . She was the music of the Otherworld brought to life, dream and desire made manifest. Niall quickly looked away before he became lost in her beauty.

Behind the monarchs came the sons and daughters of the Otherworld, bedecked in radiant green or blue mantles fringed with gold, with gold or silver helmets and armor, gold or silver swords hanging at their sides. Most were mounted, though many walked. Of those who walked, many carried instruments and made music. Some danced, lithe, hypnotic movements as fluid as a running stream, while others held spears or banners of blazing colour. Still others held tight to the leashes of blood-eyed hounds or carried raptors on their outstretched arms.

Some carried children. The secret of the Rade.

Even over the music and the dancing, Niall heard their cries. They were babies, all of them, wailing for the succor of parents who themselves wailed at their loss. Niall leaned forward, sought frantically for Orlaith.

Too far, he could not determine one swaddled child from another. He looked at the last tree, well ahead of him, that might provide shelter from the collective gaze of the Rade. It would mean coming well inside a stone's throw from the Rade, closer than he wanted to be for the moment. Close enough that any slip might alert Finvarra's horde to his presence. And Finvarra couldn't know, not yet. But he needed to see Orlaith. Shaking his head, Niall crouched low and,

as quietly and quickly as he was able, scurried through the tall grass and huddled behind the last of the woodland trees.

Breathing hard, he watched the last of the Rade step forth from the bowels of Glenatuathail, watched Finvarra lead them down the gentle slope of the hill toward Aedh Errigal. There were perhaps sixty in all, Niall guessed. And seven children. One for each year of Finvarra's profane Pact. Seven sacrifices.

Rage made his breath come faster and Niall stood. As he did, the wind picked up, blowing from the direction of Aedh Errigal.

It carried with it a hint of brimstone.

Niall stiffened and his rage drowned beneath a rising tide of fear and doubt. Had he been completely honest with himself, had he allowed himself a chance to dwell on what he was attempting, Niall would have admitted to some concern over meeting Finvarra and his Rade. These were ancient, legendary beings, full of power and mystery. No sane man did what he was doing without some measure of fear in his heart, but knowing they had his daughter, that they had come into his home and stolen her away, made facing them easier because the knowledge was a font of endless rage and hatred.

But as the acrid stench of brimstone burned his nose and throat, as his eyes watered and his staff quivered in his hands, Niall knew he would need to find something deeper than rage to survive.

He wiped at his eyes and covered his mouth. Then, with the image of Orlaith firmly in his mind, he turned to face Aedh Errigal.

Where the Devil stood looking down upon the Rade like the god he so desperately longed to be.

"Lord protect me," Niall gasped, crossing himself as he fell to his knees.

The Devil was a citadel of shadow and appalling menace. He stood thrice the height of a man. Behind a blurring, roiling darkness that not all the light in the world could dispel, the Black Prince stared down at the approaching Rade with eyes that flared incarnadine. Through the shifting veil of shadow, Niall saw a towering black crown and what might have been a pair of wings.

Behind the Devil, a hole in the hill had opened, a black void from which the foul, gusting wind breathed forth. Niall could not be certain, but as he stared at the void he thought he saw things shifting within the blackness, impatient things angered by the sight of light and life in the world.

The sight was nearly enough to undo him.

How could he, how could any man, hope to challenge such a thing? Despair, like an abyss, opened wide beneath him.

Then he remembered what he carried. In the face of despair, the thought gave him hope. Under his breath, Niall muttered the Lord's Prayer. When he finished, he forced his stinging gaze away from the Devil.

At the base of Aedh Errigal, the Rade came to a halt and Finvarra raised his hand. The music and dancing stopped. Over the moaning wind, the only sounds to be heard were the keening screams of children.

Finvarra spoke. "Bring forth the children!"

At the king's command the children fell silent, and those who carried them approached the front of the Rade.

Why were the children silent? Niall gripped his staff and rose. Had Finvarra woven some

malign glamour with his words? Fear on top of fear invaded Niall's heart. Leaning forward, he watched each of the seven child bearers approach and bow before their king. Finvarra nodded to each in turn as they rose and stepped in front of him. When all of them were ready, the seven knelt as one, heads bowed before the Devil, and held the children out before them.

"Orlaith," Niall whispered, thrusting his staff into the moist ground and reaching for his bow. As near to the Rade as he was, he still could not be sure which of the children was Orlaith. But she was there, so close . . .

"With these seven mortal souls," Finvarra proclaimed, "the Teind is paid and the Pact honored." He paused and those bearing the children rose. "Carry them forward, my sons: Let the children of mortal man burn forever, that the Otherworld might live!"

Behind the king, the Rade erupted, spears and swords up-thrust in answer to Finvarra's proclamation. Before the king, the child bearers began the ascent up the slope of Aedh Errigal where the Devil waited.

"No," Niall said from the shadow of the tree, and he knew the time had come. With his bandaged hands he reached for an arrow. As he notched it, he strode from behind the tree and screamed, "No!"

At his cry, an adamantine silence descended upon the Rade, and the only sound that was heard was the hissing flight of the rowan arrow as it pierced the night and Finvarra's heart and struck dead the King of the Otherworld beneath the light of the full moon on the night of the Teind.

Breathing hard, Niall stopped his advance only long enough to sling his bow across his back and grab the remaining arrow and his staff. Thrusting the arrow into his belt, he reached into the pouch at his side and drew forth the larger of the two glass vials.

The floor of the valley was a sea of chaos.

Finvarra's majestic form was a tower of smoke and flame. All around the burning king, the sons and daughters of the Otherworld scrambled and cried—many turned, fear clearly etched in their ethereal features, and fled into the light of Glenatuathail. One of the Rade who walked a blood-eyed hound turned and saw him. Niall recognized the hatred that burned in his eyes before he unleashed the dog and escaped into the light.

With an unholy roar, the beast charged Niall, all snapping fangs and snarling rage.

His own teeth bared, Niall unstoppered the vial and stood his ground. When the beast was near enough for Niall to feel its fetid breath, he doused it with the holy water.

The Hellhound died screaming and burning.

On the heels of the flaming creature, another of the Rade rushed at him, sword drawn and raised. Clutching the vial still, Niall closed his eyes and swung his staff to meet the descending blade. Upon striking the rowan staff, the sword shattered with a sound like breaking glass. Instinctively, Niall sealed his eyes tight and raised the hand holding the vial to cover his face. He cried out as pain hewed its way down his chest, across his waist and into his upper leg. Niall had no time at all to understand what happened. In a moment, the enraged swordsman discarded his ruined blade and lunged for Niall's throat. A second, desperate swing of the staff caught the warrior on the side of the head and killed him.

Even as his opponent's limp, broken body struck the ground, two others, clad in their green and gold armor, capes flowing behind them, charged at him. Niall, glancing down and noticing the blood that welled from a terrible gash that had sliced through his clothing and stretched across his chest and waist and down his leg, leveled his staff. Near panic at the sight of all the blood, Niall shook his head and tore his eyes from the wound. It had to have been the

sword. A piece of the shattered blade had cut him as neatly as a surgical instrument. How badly he couldn't say. His hand on his staff, he noticed, shook.

The warriors of the Rade stopped short of the burning beast, their eyes locked on Niall. For an instant, through the rising flames, Niall met their collective gaze. He wondered what they saw there, what his gaze held for them. Whatever it was, they were not able to meet it for long. They looked down at his bleeding chest, at the flaming beast and their dead brother and the pieces of his fractured sword scattered on the grass all around. They glanced back at their burning king.

Slowly, they backed away. After several steps, never taking their eyes off Niall, they joined the others of the Rade who had seen enough.

Niall, his breath a bellows, watched the Rade flee for the haven of Glenatuathail.

As though they had suddenly grown too heavy to hold, Niall dropped the staff and the vial of holy water, and slumped forward in exhaustion. Timidly, afraid of what he would find, he brought his hand slowly to his chest. The wound, though it burned like fire, was not deep. Niall closed his eyes and whispered a prayer of thanks. Finished, he raised his head to watch the last of the Rade flee the world of men.

Instead, he met the tear-filled gaze of Oonaugh, the Queen, who alone among the Rade, remained. And, despite all he had done, despite the towering rage that engulfed him and drove him to do things he thought beyond any man, Niall was afraid of the things he saw in her eyes.

A moment later, without a word spoken, Oonaugh too, turned, and then Rade was gone and Glenatuathail was whole. And only the seven child bearers were left standing, their faces aghast in the glow of their burning king, upon the side of Aedh Errigal.

The seven and the Devil.

The bearers of the children stared at him as though he were the most terrifying thing in all the worlds.

He was not, of course, was nothing more than a man doing what he had to do, what they had forced him to do.

And if, in light of all he had accomplished, the child bearers of Finvarra forgot that, the Devil did not.

As Niall bent to retrieve his staff and finish what he started, his throat constricted and he could no longer breathe. Eyes bulging, he clutched his neck, gasped desperately for air. Before he could fully grasp what was happening, Niall was lifted, bleeding and wounded from the ground, as though by an invisible hand. Uncomprehending, he dangled for a moment several feet above the soft earth before he hurtled like a stone through the night up against the last of the woodland trees. Air and blood exploded from Niall's body as he was pinned to the tall trunk. He closed his eyes and cried out in pain.

"Bravely done," the Devil said. Though they were some distance apart, the Devil's voice, the sound of grinding bone, cut across the intervening expanse of grasslands to settle as a whisper in Niall's ear. Against the pain in his head and back, Niall forced his eyes open. The Devil's gaze was a winter wind, and for the second time that night, Niall wondered how he could ever have imagined challenging such a being. The weight of the Devil's livid gaze battered him until Niall looked away.

"But what shall you do now? You are nothing to me. Less. You can no more harm me than you can harm the stars. I am beyond your precious water, your pathetic iron and wood. For all your courage, you have accomplished nothing. Another will rise in Finvarra's place and the Teind will go on. As it always has."

All at once, the force that held him in place released its grip and Niall plunged to the ground. He landed hard against the base of the tree and collapsed to the ground reaching for his injured ankle. Before he could grasp it, he was thrust again against the trunk of the tree. The wind was driven from his lungs and for an instant the world went black when his head struck the wood.

"I will take your daughter, and these others," the Devil whispered in Niall's ear from across the clearing, "then I will visit you in your dreams that you might watch them burn. Bring the children to me!"

At the Devil's command, the force that held Niall in place was dismissed once more.

Barely able to draw breath, bleeding and battered, Niall toppled to the ground like a broken toy. The damp coolness of the earth was a blessing against the stink of his sweating, burning flesh. Lying amid the decomposing leaves and soft pine needles, unable to muster the strength to rise, he thought of Casidhe, at home, alone. He would never see her again. Not enough that he could not protect his daughter; now, on a fool's quest, he had not only failed to bring her back, but had thrown away his own life as well. Oh, Casidhe . . .

Do you know what it is you seek to undo? Father Eoghan's words. Only now, at the very last, his own blood soaking the forest floor, could he say yes, he understood. Only now could he—

Blood.

Like the Lord Christ rising on the Third Day, hope rose in Niall's heaving breast.

Struggling through the many layers of his pain, Niall rolled onto his back and reached down to his waist.

Felt all his hopes and dreams wither and die in his breast.

The shard of blade that cut him so neatly, that sliced so cleanly through his shirt and breeches, had also severed his belt.

The belt that held his arrow. And his pouch.

"No. No. Nonononono." Frantic, Niall scrambled to his knees, sought desperately for the instruments that were his only hope of ever regaining his daughter. It could not end like this. Not like this. The trees. The Crucifix. The blessed iron of the arrow that slew the King of the Otherworld. Surely all these things had meant God was with him. God, who had watched over him for so long, who had kept him safe. Who had never left his side even as Niall had left the world. God would not do this, would not have brought him this far only to abandon him now.

But the pouch and the arrow were gone, and a creature from the Otherworld bore his daughter into the Devil's hands.

The arrow, the pouch, they must have slipped free as he hurtled through the air. Had that been the Devil's plan all along? To deprive him of the implements of his salvation?

Realization of his failure drove the breath from his lungs, struck him with all the force of a collapsing mountain.

"Orlaith," he whispered, tears tracing their paths down his muddied face. In his mind, Niall pictured his daughter's beautiful face, her tiny dimples and fine red hair. He thought of her sleeping and dreaming, imagined how she might look when she was grown and ready to live her life on her own.

Knew she would never have that chance because he had not been strong enough to save her. Weeping, broken, Niall closed his eyes and collapsed to the ground.

And were it not for the hissing flight of the arrow, he would have missed the miracle.

* * *

"I don't understand."

In the small, hidden chamber beneath the chapel, Niall had reached for the second box. Perhaps twice the size of his clenched fist, the box had contained a slightly smaller chest. All iron and gold, the chest was studded with precious gems and inlaid with the image of the Crucifixion. In the uncertain light, Niall saw the image of the crucified Christ, the Spear of Longinus protruding from his side. Beneath the dying Son, a man knelt, and in his hands he held a small plate.

Niall's eyes grew wide and he stumbled back from the chest, crossing himself quickly and falling to his knees.

Father Eoghan stepped around and pulled the chest free of the box. He then withdrew a small key from beneath the collar of his robe. Niall did not know where the priest inserted it, but a moment later he heard a soft click. When Eoghan turned, the chest was open. Awed, Niall leaned forward. Inside the chest were two glass tubes, each the length of his smallest finger. The tubes sat nestled inside special gold-velvet slots clearly designed to hold them safe and still. Inside each of the narrow tubes, a tiny amount of crimson liquid could be seen. Niall could hardly breathe.

"Marvelous, are they not?" Father Eoghan whispered. "The most precious thing in all the world."

Niall could only shake his head. "The Blood of Christ," he whispered. "Here?"

"And why not here?" Father Eoghan said. "It is the reason this chapel was raised. At the end of a journey even I know little of, the chest was hidden at the great monastery of Clonfert. When word arrived that the Norsemen had pushed into the territory of Ui Neill in 841, Abbot Keallach decided he could not risk having the chest fall into the hands of the barbarians. Word had reached Clonfert regarding the butchery and slaughter that followed the arrival of the Norsemen, and in his heart, Keallach knew Clonfert would fall. So, in secret, he handed the chest to one of his monks and told him to take it into the mountains, beyond the reach of the invaders. When he found a safe place, the monk, whose name was never known, was ordered to raise a small chapel and keep the chest safe. But before he went, Keallach offered him a second gift."

"The Fire," Niall finished, understanding at last why the terrible weapon was in this place.

"Indeed. And since that time, this chapel, larger now, has stood as a haven for the chest, and each new priest who calls this place home is told its secrets and sworn to protect the chest at any cost."

"Why have you shown me this, Father?"

Silent for a moment, Eoghan then reached into the chest and withdrew one of the glass tubes. "For more than nine-hundred years this treasure has remained safe and inviolate, hidden from the world. Though potent beyond measure, it has never had cause to make its presence felt." Father Eoghan stared at Niall. He handed him the tube.

"The holy water by the entrance should aid you against the foul creatures of the Otherworld," the priest said. "And there are other things, as you will know. But should you succeed in finding Orlaith, there shall come a time during that terrible night when you stand against the Devil himself." Eoghan's eyes dropped to the tube and its red-black contents. "It is said that Christ loved all men equally, but that he held a special place for children. Use this gift, Niall, and bring your daughter back."

* * *

It should have been too far. Casidhe had known when she notched and sighted in the darkness, over the flames and across the expanse. She had learned quickly, knew she could shoot as well as most. Knew too, that the shot was beyond her.

Casidhe had watched in horror from the edge of the forest as the Rade strode forth from the bowels of Glenatuathail, had been forced to fight down a scream and an urge to flee that had been towering in its strength, when she saw the Devil standing upon the slopes of Aedh Errigal. Remaining there, in the forest and the darkness, in the face of that all-encompassing menace, had been, perhaps, the hardest thing she had ever done in her life. Then she had watched in pride and horror as the arrow split the night and killed Finvarra, as Niall battled and killed the hound and the warrior, wanted to cry out and run to him when the shard of the broken blade carved its way down his chest.

But she had not. Through it all, she had stayed, buried in shadow. She could not have said what it was that made her stay. Perhaps it had been the same force that drove her to follow Niall to this dark, unholy place. Casidhe had not been baptized, did not know if Niall's God would have seen fit to guide her, as she knew He had been guiding Niall all along. But something had made her follow him, and something had made her stay. And when Niall was sent hurtling through the air by a power that was older than the world, and the arrow and the pouch had fallen from his severed belt to land upon the soft forest floor, she understood at last why it was she had been brought here.

In the face of her terror, a calm had come over Casidhe as she claimed the fallen implements. No one paid her any attention; it had been as though she were not even there. In a way, that was exactly how it felt. It seemed as though it were someone else opening the pouch, someone else pulling out the vial that contained the blood of the Son of Man. Someone else who poured that same sacred blood onto the blessed head of the arrow her husband had carved.

Then she had notched and sighted and knew, knew as well as she knew anything, that it was too far, that the shot, in darkness, was beyond her.

Except on that night, it was not. And the arrow that bore her daughter's name, that was launched in love and carried on its blessed head the blood of Christ, flew like the Spear of Longinus thrown so long ago, its crimson head gleaming in Finvarra's flames, to strike the Devil in the heart, penetrating the shadows that cloaked him as the sun's rays penetrated the dark.

For a moment, Casidhe watched the Devil stagger back, watched his crowned head dip to stare down at the impossible arrow protruding from his chest.

"What . . . is this?" the Devil asked, staggering back a second step.

Then he screamed.

The agony of the Devil shook the Hollow Hills and echoed far into the night. Casidhe watched him collapse to his knees. As he did, the veil of shadow that protected him began to burn away. Casidhe had a fleeting glimpse of a handsome face, of fire-scored wings shorn of plumage. As the shadow continued to fall, three pairs of hands reached outward from the void to grab him and pull him back into the waiting darkness. For an instant, the Black Prince weakly fought against those come to gather him, and he turned, for the first time, to Casidhe.

"Never stray from His sight," the Devil whispered. "For I shall be waiting."

And then the hole in Aedh Errigal closed and the Devil was gone.

* * *

Utter silence descended on the small valley. For a moment, Niall did not understand. Lying on the ground, he stared up at his wife from her place far from him at the edge of the forest. Holding her bow, standing straight and tall and proud, she seemed a goddess, one of the Old Powers made manifest. It was, Niall realized with absolute conviction, a miracle. How did a mortal man deal with such things? How could a mortal heart contain all the emotion that caused his heart to lurch and buck inside him? Niall shook his head.

On the slope of Aedh Errigal, the gazes of the seven child bearers flitted from one of them to the other. Then, very carefully, awe reflected clearly in their eyes, they placed the children on the ground and fled into the surrounding shadows.

When they were gone, Casidhe turned to him for the first time. For a moment, she hesitated. She would be fearing for him, would likely have seen the stroke that opened his chest. She took a first step towards him.

He shook his head. "No. Go to her," he said, his words carrying clearly through the unnatural silence of the night. Then, louder, still unable to rise, "Go to her!"

She paused for only an instant before she dropped her bow and ran toward the slope.

Niall bowed his head. The children had made no sound for a long time.

"Please, Lord," he whispered. "Just one more miracle." When he looked up, he watched Casidhe frantically search from one child to the next. None of them, he noticed, were moving.

Then all at once he heard Casidhe cry out, saw her fall to her knees and weep.

And what was left of his heart turned to ash and blew away.

V

Father Eoghan, radiant in his white stole, raised the wailing infant over his head for all to see. When he brought her down and settled her against his breast, Niall and Casidhe reached out and each laid a hand upon her. Then Father Eoghan dipped his hand into the baptismal font and before the small congregation pronounced, "Orlaith O'Callaghan, I baptize thee in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost." The declaration of each member of the Trinity was accompanied by the pouring of a handful of Holy Water onto Orlaith's forehead. When he finished with the water, Father Eoghan reached behind to where the altar server stood holding the vial of chrism. Dipping his thumb into the blessed oil, he made the sign of the cross on Orlaith's forehead and said, "Give to her to understand, Lord God, that from this day forward she is united in Christ, engrafted on His body, and therefore is called a Christian."

Niall thought his heart would burst as Father Eoghan recited the words.

The children on the slope of Aedh Errigal had been asleep. Of course they had been. The Devil wanted living sacrifices. After Casidhe brought Orlaith to him and laid her down upon the ground, he had watched her face twitch and knew she was dreaming. He had stared at his daughter, then his wife. His face, he remembered, had felt too small to encompass the smile that spread across it.

"I couldn't let you do this thing alone," Casidhe had said. "She is my child too." There had been nothing to say to that, nothing at all. So he said nothing, only stared at her and wondered how he, of all the people in the world, had been lucky enough to find her.

It had not been long after that all the infants, Orlaith among them, awoke and began crying. Injured as he was, they had no way of carrying seven screaming children. Desperate, uncertain how long it might be until help arrived, they found a small cave. Niall, unable to travel any great distance on his ankle, decided he would stay with the children while Casidhe went in search of help. Armagh, he had said, was not far. It was only a couple hours later that Casidhe returned with a farmer, Padraigh, and his three sons. They brought with them a horse. Padraigh and his sons took the children, and promised to do all in their power to seek out the parents. "If you cannot find them," Niall had said, "there is a small chapel in the Wicklow Mountains..." Niall had also asked Padraigh not to mention his name, or Casidhe's. Too much had happened, too much he could never explain. The farmer had nodded his understanding. Then Padraigh offered the mount to Niall, who had accepted gratefully, and the three of them, he and his family, rode home.

Niall had returned the mount before they arrived at the church. He had offered to pay the man, but Padraigh steadfastly refused. He had found four of the parents already, he told Niall, and the looks on their faces were more than thanks enough. He had his sons out, even now, searching for the others. Niall's name, of course, had never been mentioned.

In the church, Father Eoghan placed a white veil on Orlaith's head and declared, "Receive this white garment, which mayest thou carry without stain before the judgment seat of Our Lord Jesus Christ, that thou mayest have eternal life. Amen."

"Amen," echoed the few people scattered around the inside of the small church. Not many, but more than had been present when he first started coming to this place. The Word was spreading. As Father Eoghan passed Orlaith, who was no longer crying, back to Casidhe, Niall thought back to that night in the forest.

Never stray from His sight. The Devil's words, spoken to Casidhe, but heard by them both, had been meant to frighten them, to make his family fear the dark. But he knew now that the Lord saw through the deepest darkness, and that there was no place he could go where God could not see him and those he loved. The thought sent peace and warmth flowing through Niall's body.

Casidhe handed Orlaith to him, then rose up on her toes and kissed him on the cheek.

"Ready?" he asked.

Casidhe stared at him and nodded. "How could I not be?"

Then Father Eoghan, his infectious smile still spread across his face, reached across and took her hand, and it was her turn to approach the font.

The End

Scott is an elementary school teacher from Windsor, ON, who has taught all grade levels from elementary school through university. He lives at home with his wife (oh, yes, sorry) WONDERFUL wife and two beautiful daughters.

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He turned back and stared at her, weighing what he could barter the extra water for. "OK," he said and hunkered down on the sill to watch.

A pair of Corridor Cops, silver, double-star tattoos standing out like badges, walked past. The younger one stopped when he saw the man lurking in the doorway of the old brewery. "Hey buddy, c'mere. Let's see your UCO."

The fat man limped over and held out his wrist. The cop took out a comcorder. His partner shook his head. "Don't bother," he said and pointed at the fat man's chest. "It's the start of the Season." The younger one nodded, and they moved on.

The hunted man brought his left hand up and gingerly fingered the tender, puckered outline of a new, yellow crescent tattoo, which now overlaid the lifelong emblem of the Proctor & Gamble Clan. He had been vested in the Company since birth. But at sixty-five. the Clan turned him out. At the Senior Center that morning, a young artist painfully hammered and dyed the new tattoo into him. The yellow crescent design identified him as a player in the Season; its freshness identified him as a raw and untested newcomer . . . a Bigelow. When the operation was complete, the workers at the Senior Center gave him his choice of bladed weapons and sent him out onto the street.

He clutched the empty scabbard at his waist. The knife was also gone. *They can be replaced . . . can't they*?

A garbage can rattled in the alley. The man's eyes darted to the people across the street. He took a faltering half step.

A voice snicked out of the gloom. "No one will hide you in the crowd, old man."

The man limped back to the door, trying to force it open. He looked up at the woman and the young man in the window. "Please," he begged.

Neither of them moved. "Now it gets interesting," the woman laughed.

He turned once more toward the crowd, wondering if he *could* lose himself within the swarms of people. Just then his pursuer came through the gate. The street light fell full upon her. She was tall and thin, with the hooked nose of a Middle Easterner. She carried a Bowie knife in one hand and his knife in the other. Tattooed on her chest was a long healed scar of a yellow crescent. The hunted man sagged into the doorway, vainly trying to hide himself.

The woman caught this flicker of movement and walked noiselessly toward him. She called out to her prey, "It's all over, Bigelow."

The young man leaned perilously out of the window. "Run, ya' ol' fart! Run!"

The rose tattooed woman pulled him back in. "Shut up!" she cried. "Let the Bigelow make up his own mind."

Below them, the man they called Bigelow simply gave up, falling against the brewery and sliding down the rough bricks to his knees.

"Hey!" his pursuer cried out, truly concerned. "Don't go having a heart attack. That won't help me at all." She rushed forward and pointed the sword at the man's throat.

"I'm not having a heart attack," the man said matter-of-factly. He was surprised at his own calmness. He was even a little chagrined that the letting go of his life was to be such a simple affair after all. He smiled at the woman who was hunting him. "There's just no place to go."

Shifting her stance backward a little, the woman glanced warily about her, but there was no evidence of any trap.

Above, the young man spat in disgust and stomped away from the window. His companion

said soothingly, "Look, we'll use your water to bathe with, and I'll let you wash me." The young man returned to the window to watch the sport below.

The old Arab woman looked down at her victim. "You just turn sixty-five, Bigelow?" she asked in English Standard.

The man nodded. He suddenly felt loquacious. "My name isn't Bigelow, you know. It's Hamlin."

"Sure. And I'm Indra Hussein from Yemen. Glad to meet you," the woman mocked. "You're a Bigelow until you make your first kill and earn your first red sash." She laughed harshly. "Something you aren't likely to do this lifetime."

Hamlin nodded, remembering the simplicity of the rules told him at the Senior Center—kill or be killed. Kill and you stayed alive for a year.

The Arab relaxed a little, but her eyes kept searching the area around the two of them. She hadn't always been so generous. After turning sixty-five, twenty years earlier, she killed quickly and savagely.

"I wasn't prepared," Hamlin said. "I expected the Season to be more genteel than this. Something like dueling."

"You had sixty-five years to prepare, Bigelow. You would have killed me."

"I suppose."

"I suppose." Her eyes glared at him, and she pulled back her head scarf, revealing a lurid, red line along her temple. Blood seeped from the wound, trickling in delicate, branching streams through short, gray hair, down her cheek to pool along her jawline. "I suppose this was an accident."

"I was scared and didn't know what I was doing," Hamlin said. "I even dropped my weapons, I was so startled when the tip struck you."

The woman snorted contemptuously.

"Somehow, it doesn't seem real," Hamlin reflected sadly. "To live like this."

"At least with the Season the Clans give us a chance to reclaim our credit and water rights for a year. It's better than lining everyone against a wall."

Hamlin didn't bother to argue. He knew the Yemeni was right. Instead, he just looked into the face of the old woman he knew was going to take his life. He saw the ever present heat there, in sweat beading up and running down the deep lines of her face. It collected in the space between the hard, withered flesh of her breasts. He could count her ribs like steps carved into the skin. Suddenly, looking up into her dark, hawk eyes, he felt ashamed of his corpulence. He whispered to no one in particular, "When I was a boy, the Ohio Valley still had winter, and there was snow sometimes."

"What's that, Bigelow?" asked the Yemeni.

He shook his head, as if clearing it of the trivia to concentrate on the last seconds of his life.

"Nothing." He eased himself against the door frame. Wariness snapped back into the Arab's stance, and she brought the rapier to bear on him. Hamlin laughed wryly. It was his turn to be scornful. "I won't try anything. Just make it quick."

She didn't answer. She stood close and pointed the sword tip at his heart. Hamlin flinched as he saw the woman's forearm tighten; but the Yemeni just toppled to the side slowly, as if she had forgotten how to stand, and thudded against the concrete sidewalk at Hamlin's feet. From her back protruded a large knife.

Hamlin reached out diffidently and touched the crudely made throwing knife sticking between the third and fourth vertebrae. The iron handle felt cold. Strangely, he was aghast at this violent act against the woman to whom he had just given his life. His eyes sought the rapier, which had clattered to the ground beside him. Uncertainly his hand shifted toward the handle. He heard the sound of footsteps. Flustered, he hid his hand under his armpit and drew back against the building as an older man and woman pelted down the street from the corner.

"I thought they had gotten away from us," the woman gasped.

"I guess not," the man said grimly. He had a pencil-thin mustache in a hard lined face. Impassively he pulled the knife from between the Arab's shoulder blades.

Hamlin was shaking, his sudden reprieve unnerving him. "Th... th... thanks," he stammered hoarsely. "I... I don't know who you are. But thank you for saving my life."

"No need to thank us." The man handed the knife to the woman haft first. "I'm Frank. This is Harriet." The woman smiled at him. Her hair was white, and she was very thin. She looked far older than sixty-five. "You strong enough to stand?" Frank asked.

Hamlin nodded weakly. "I think so."

"Here, let me give you a hand up." Frank grabbed Hamlin's wrists and jerked him up and onto the knife in Harriet's hand. The blade buried itself deep into his chest and twisted.

Hamlin, astonishment in his eyes, like open windows in the house of his face, died without a whimper.

* * *

Harriet sighed. "The new Bigelows now-a-days are too easy. This one even lost his weapons."

"Ah, but the Arab was a coup. She must have been ninety. That's a long time to survive each Season," observed Frank.

"True," Harriet answered. "Kind of makes you wish you could mount her over the fireplace. She should be remembered somehow. If the Center would allow us to keep the scalps, that would be something, wouldn't it? I mean, to be remembered in someone's home at least."

Frank nodded. He knew Harriet was right. The killing became impersonal once the Senior Center tagged their claims, recording the DNA of the trophies and the victors, and then gave them a red sash to wear—protecting them from those still hunting and allowing them to receive once more their food and water pensions. Still, it was only the first day of the Season and they would be safe for yet another year. No one would kill a person wearing a sash. He would lose everything. He wouldn't be able to hide. Everywhere people would turn him in for the extra ration reward, usually water.

"Damn!" Frank exclaimed.

Harriet's head jerked up and she looked around wildly. "What?"

Frank smiled. "Sorry. It's just that we have their weapons. We should be able to sell them for enough water to take a shower."

"Better take the scalps to the Center," was all she said.

Frank bent down and, with his knife, deftly made an incision around the hairline of both victims. Then with the precision of a surgeon, he peeled back the scalps, careful not to get the blood on his clothes. He placed them into a disposable baggie with the Senior Center's logo on it.

A passing flitter cab, its wings folded and ground effect engines idled, halted. The driver

stuck his head out the window. Jutting his chin at the two bodies at their feet, he asked, "Need a lift to the Center? Usual fare."

He was an ancient man with folds of weathered skin around his neck. From where they stood, Frank and Harriet could see a hint of red across his left shoulder. They approached slowly, relaxing only when they clearly saw the red baldric the cab driver wore across his chest from shoulder to waist, showing a successful hunt. They entered the back seat. The cab's license said he was Ezra Halloway, 102 years old.

"He's older than the Arab," Harriet whispered to Frank. He nodded.

"Felicitations on your stalk," Frank said politely to the driver.

"Thank you. And on yours too," the cabbie answered just as politely. "Good to get it out of the way early, before a pack of greywolves finds you, huh?"

Frank shuddered, thinking about the large gangs of seniors that swept the res, flushing out single hunters.

The driver turned his swivel seat toward them. "OK. Show me your UCO's." The two passengers extended their right arms. Implanted at birth under the skin along the wrist were two rows of numbers and lines. The driver flashed a comcorder which zigged a red line across each implant. At the end of the night, when the cabbie totaled his receipts, the bank's DNA computer would automatically debit the fares from Frank and Harriet's accounts, which would be unfrozen since they would have logged their individual tallies for the Season. The implant only functioned while a person lived. Once he or she died, the numbers faded and became a dark, unusable smudge.

"Let's get you to the Senior Center," the driver said. He adjusted the controls from street drive to flight. "Watch the bounce," he warned. There was a violent jerk as the flitter craft shifted power to its takeoff spring and catapulted into the windless night. Everyone was pushed deeply into the foam padded seats. Wings unfolded and snapped into place with a sharp crack of crysteel against crysteel. The ground effect motor roared alive and drove them through the canyons of the Corridor City, above the buildings and into the sable sky. Frank and Harriet slowly exhaled.

The cabbie laughed. "I've been driving a flitter for thirty years, and the bounce still takes my breath away. If the wings didn't unfold, it could be a really hard landing." His passengers said nothing.

"I see you bagged Indra Hussein," the cabbie went on.

"Frank did with a knife throw at thirty-five feet."

The cabbie shrugged. "She was a good hunter. Who was the other?"

"Just some Bigelow," Harriet said disparagingly.

The driver nodded knowingly. "I know what you mean. I got a Bigelow, right where you're sitting, this morning."

Harriet squirmed a little.

"He got into my cab at the Senior Center right after he'd registered. Told me he was going uptown to bag a Bigelow! Can you believe it? Haw! Haw!" The old driver swiveled his chair and grinned at his passengers, revealing smoke-yellow teeth, cracked and broken. "I just turned around and nailed him. Went into the Center and got my sash. Easiest stalk I ever made." The old cabbie cackled. After a few seconds he turned back and flew on.

The cab flitted through the night quietly. The cabbie concentrated on taking his passengers to the old Cincinnati Senior Center at the abandoned Presbyterian Church on Vine

Street. Frank watched the skin in the old driver's neck furrow and flatten as he weaved through the traffic. Harriet stared out the flitter's plasglass canopy. Below, tall, angular buildings of the Cincy-Pitts Corridor City stretched their metal and glass necks into the sky along the serpentine banks of the Ohio River and faded into a shapeless, sparkling mass on the distant horizon. The silence in the flitter deepened into melancholy.

Impulsively Frank reached over and patted Harriet's knee. "Sam would have been proud of you tonight," he said softly.

Harriet looked at him, her eyes sad and filmy. "I suppose," she answered. She reached out and held his hand.

* * *

The flittercab shuddered violently. "Hold on!" the cabbie shouted. He gripped the stick and drove it hard over. He and his passengers surged against the seat restraints. Night and glass and metal whirled around them. Faces flowed and twisted under the G-forces of the spiraling turn. Halloway made a raspy, sawing noise as he strained against the screaming ground effect motors. Then the flitter shuddered a second time, banked hard, righted itself, and shot along at street level. Finally the old cabbie brought it under control and set it down.

Frank and Harriet let go of each other as the cab coasted to a stop. A few blocks away, the lights of the Senior Center blazed golden and inviting.

"That was close," Halloway wheezed.

"We'll . . . we'll get out here," Frank croaked and reached out to press the emergency canopy release.

Halloway turned around. "Not so fast," he said, pointing an ancient snub-nosed .38 at them. Frank reached for his knife. Halloway pulled the trigger. The blast deafened all of them. Frank cried out as he was slammed back into the seat. Harriet inched forward to steady him, but the cabbie motioned her to sit back. He tossed her an oil-stained rag. "I only winged him. Put pressure on it to stop the bleeding." She folded the cloth and held it against Frank's shoulder. Halloway chuckled. "Don't see too many of these. It's a relic from the early days of the season, before the Clans outlawed them."

"Why?" Frank asked through clenched teeth.

Halloway grimaced.

"I'm sorry; I truly am. But I need those scalps you took."

Harriet frowned. "You have a sash."

"My nephew and his wife are too crippled to hunt any more, so I'll be taking your scalps for them. You two can get new ones."

He pressed a button on the center console. The plasglass canopy sprung open. He motioned with the pistol, and Frank and Harriet got out. Seconds later he tossed their weapons onto the pavement. "You'll be needing these."

Frank grimaced. "What for? You might as well kill us now and get it over with. We're a long way from home, and I won't last long with this busted wing."

Halloway laughed, his lips set in a mocking smile. "Now that would be breaking the rules of the Season." He then eased the joy stick forward, and the flittercab rolled away. Halloway punched another stud, and the canopy snicked shut. The cab gained momentum and sprang into the night. Wings snapped open as the engine hissed to life. He guided the flitter in a sweeping

turn. Glancing below, he spotted Frank and Harriet. They had picked up their weapons and now scurried toward the nearest building. A pack of greywolves turned the corner and trotted after them. Halloway fled east. Red and purple seared the horizon. The second dawn was coming.

The End

Mark Reeder kicked around the universe for 36 years before settling in Boulder, Colorado, with his wife, Debbie Kranzler. Along the way he acquired a Master's Degree in History from the University of Cincinnati and several bruises from the College of Hard Knocks. Since then he has learned to hangglide, was the chief writer for the nationally syndicated radio talk show, "Against the Rush," (listened to by tens of people across the country) and worked for Centre Communications as a researcher and script writer. His short stories have appeared on the web at 'Deep Magic', 'Quantum Muse', 'Dark Planet', 'Rocket Stories' and 'Galaxy E-zine'. His first science fiction/fantasy novel, 'A Dark kNight for the King,' written with co-author Ron Meyer, was released by Publish America in 2002 and is available at amazon.com.

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was Bellona. I felt welts lift on the skin and grow red and bulbous, even as I knew Maggie's skin would be growing clear and fair. I clung to that image of her cleansing and bore down against the muffling of my own identity.

Maggie was smaller than me by half, but pain does not care. It pricked me with the same intensity, quickened my breath with the same force. Finally, I was down to the redness in Maggie's tear-choked eyes, and as I felt my own eyes enflame, I opened them and looked at her. Then a wave of dizziness hit me and I sank to the rug.

"Thank you, Bearer," I heard Maggie's mother say over my head, sensed her lean forward and wrap her arms around her child. "Maggie, what do you say?" I sat back and tilted my head up.

"Thank you," Maggie said, running her hands across her flawless skin. I took inventory of my new injuries. I counted up a few extra scrapes and bruises, the repertoire of the active child, even one not chasing bees.

It was an effort to climb to my feet, and even the touch of the still air aggravated my skin. My vision blackened and I took a rough grip on the wooden arm of the couch. The women appeared in multicolored blotches in front of me, and I took a deep breath, forcing a smile. "You'll leave that hive alone now, won't you, Maggie?" I knew the answer, whatever she might say.

The girl nodded, but her eyes slid to one side. I saw her mother frown, but she made sweeping motions with her hands to usher her family out of the house. Then she turned to me. "Whatever would we do without you, Bellona?" She smiled. It might have been motherly; I wouldn't know. "I remember when you were just this big," she held her hand somewhere above her waist, "when they found your gift and gave you this house, took you away from that soapmaker. How blessed we all are." The words were hollow. Maggie's identity and pain crowding in with mine gave my eyes and ears a sharpness for untruth, and I think the petulant mother sensed it. With a flash of sunlight from the door that dazzled my dry eyes, she and her family were gone.

Sweat soaked my shift and bit my welted skin. I desperately wanted that cup of tea, but turned toward the bedroom and walked there slowly instead. Bending carefully, I sat before the cupboard beside the bed and drew a key from my pocket. Then unlocked and opened it, revealing what I never let the villagers see.

Inside were three shelves, each covered with a layer of smooth river stones. I ran a hand across them, palm and fingers slipping across their surfaces, and came to a flat clay-colored one. I picked it up. It was heavy and cool.

Pressing the stone between my palms, I turned and leaned back against the bed. Balanced, eyes shut, I opened the gates between myself and the stone.

Coolness flooded me, welcomed me, and a tense breath escaped my mouth. A whisper, strange but grown comforting, murmured wordlessly in my ear before fading. This stone would not hold much more, but it carried some of Maggie's pain already, and it grew warm as it took on its new burden. The stinging faded from my arms and the terrible lassitude in my chest began to unravel, then disappear. When all of the poison was gone, I pressed the warm stone to my lips, then returned it to its place and locked the cupboard.

Weary but relieved, I stood and returned to the kitchen for my tea.

* * *

I was up late that night; I am always up late. When the dishes were done, the fire banked, and I could find no other excuse to remain awake, I blew out the kitchen candle and walked through the smoky darkness to my bedroom. Each stone rested in my mind as a little patch of blankness even as they rested in the cupboard. With every addition I made to them, they became clearer, deeper, even when I wasn't touching them.

I knelt again by the cupboard, unlocking and opening it. Now that I held only my own pain, the stones glowed to my eyes, each with a different color, except the ones that hadn't yet been filled. I passed my hands over them, a faint ache spreading through my fingers where they touched, and memories of old pain taken and given whispered through my body. In the very back of the cupboard was my first stone, a dark grey one no longer than my thumb. I had picked it up as a child and accidentally sent a mosquito bite into it. The grey stone was my favorite, but I tried never to think that around the others, lest they become jealous.

Sometimes I thought the stones spoke to me. They murmured when I touched them, and sometimes I could even hear them when the cupboard was locked. They liked me, respected me, even the ones that were angry, as several of them were. Unlike the villagers, they could hold their own pain and more; they were like me. Each stone was unique, composed of its own minerals, not like the villagers, whose pain was all the same. And stones did not sweat, did not bleed.

My hands lingered over the rows of stones. They reminded me of my soap: shaped by the water, accepting what was given them, uncomplaining. I said good night to each one in turn, then locked them away, slipped beneath my quilt, and slept.

* * *

It was a busy week. I filled five new stones with pain for the village and had to make a trip down to the river to collect more.

Gill Hammersmith and his son were repairing the roof of their house roughly six plots away from my cottage. The river ran past it, powering a waterwheel that ground grain in the adjacent mill. By sheerest chance I was there on the far side of the wheel, hunting for stones along the shore, drawing in the scent of rocks and moss and wind. I was there to feel him fall.

The stones gave me sensitivity to pain, but only when it was nearly upon me, or so I thought. Yet when twelve-year-old Vance Hammersmith fell from the half-tiled roof, I felt it. His terror was mine the moment his foot slipped across the wet mortar; our elbow cracked as he slammed it into the pile of baked clay tiles in an attempt to right himself.

We fell five feet and then caught the edge of a scythe—propped so benignly, so casually, against the water barrels alongside the house—with his stomach. The curved blade cut through his vitals easily and caught against his spine, creaking in my ears. For one macabre moment we hung there like a hooked duck on a butcher's rack, blood soaking through his shirt, before the scythe shaft unbalanced and toppled him to the ground, blade still wedged beneath his ribs.

His impact with the ground jarred me out of my shock. I was running before I knew consciously what had happened, and turned the corner of the house to catch sight of Vance before me. Right around then the women of the house appeared in the doorway, caught sight of the boy, and started to scream, rushing between us. Vance's dog, a lean black and white creature with a long nose, raced out in front of them and began to bark wildly. Vance's pain roared at me, and I could only feel fleeting annoyance for the family's petty, useless fear.

I fought my way through the gaggle of hysterical women—someday they would learn that

screaming does nothing for pain—and laid my hands on the boy. The heat of his injury blinded me for a moment before I grit my teeth and collapsed the barriers between us, letting the full brunt of his pain flood into my veins.

The body could never be made to like pain, but the mind could appreciate its variances. I had never borne anything like this before. It was sheerest exquisite agony to stretch out one of my hands and grasp the sickle-head of the scythe. When I pulled it free of Vance's body, a cry ripped forth from both our throats and hot tears striped my face. I fell across the boy's chest, and with the full contact of his blood and my skin, pulled his injury into myself.

I felt my own stomach tear open, and numbness spread through my arms. I knew what I needed to do, knew what I *would* do, or die, but through the haze and darkness of my own agony resisted the decision. The stones could not be seen before the villagers. They were *mine*. The villagers did not understand them, not as I did. They never would.

My body would not listen. One hand managed to reach into my apron pocket and pull out two of the new river stones. Breaking, I relentlessly siphoned pain into them, letting it burn through me at such a rate that the stones scalded my palms and sucked the last of the light from my vision. A moment of relief pulsed through me, and I was dimly aware of the barest knitting of the flesh at my middle, before exhaustion took me.

I remember Vance's face, imminent death not yet faded from his expression, etched against my unseeing eyes, etched against the darkness.

* * *

When I woke, the stones were speaking to me.

Look at you, they said. *Look at what they have done to you.* The words slithered through the pounding headache that had taken up residence between my temples, blurred together with my own thoughts; my voice, not my voice.

My eyes were crusted with sleep-sand that crackled when I opened them. The wooden ceiling of my cottage was overhead, and my bed beneath me. My quilt, stained with fluid, stuck to my back when I folded myself upward; an action that didn't last long, for my stomach, still torn on the inside, stabbed my spine. I fell back to the bed, gasping and remembering what had happened. *And you*, the stones said, two simple words that twisted my gut, *you let them become helpless.*

My gorge suddenly surged upward and I struggled off of the bed, falling to the wooden floor on my hands and knees. The impact was too much. I lost what little remained in my stomach, and the sharp scent of blood and bile sent nausea coursing through my chest and sinuses. It mingled with my sudden crushing guilt—from the stones or from myself I could not know, but I hated it. The slash across my stomach split open with a pop and I heard blood drip onto the floor, a patter that rattled through the roaring in my ears, incongruously loud.

The cupboard was not far away, and I crawled toward it. My hands felt sluggish and unresponsive as I fumbled through my pockets for the key.

Why do you let them do this? the stones asked.

I paused. "I have to. They can't do it for themselves." My vision swam.

And when you can't do for yourself? Where are they?

I didn't want to listen to this; in my struggling state the words bled into my thoughts, or maybe surged from them to begin with. Finally locating the key, I unlocked the cupboard and pulled out my largest stone. I'd been saving it for a year.

With the stone in my hands I fell against the bed, closing my eyes and letting everything pour into it. My pain, my exhaustion, my fear—everything went into the stone, disappeared beneath its smooth surface. Cold, the cold of stones, the cold of not-feeling, gripped me, not comforting this time, but preferable to agony.

I do not know how long I sat there. In the ever-dusk of the little house, its blue curtains always drawn. It could have been minutes or hours. I emptied myself, became nothing.

When my ankles began to buzz for lack of circulation, I pushed myself to my feet again and placed the stone back in the cupboard, without locking it. With my pain gone, there was no reason to just sit there any longer, so I went about cleaning up the remains of my illness. I clung to my emptiness.

The quilt was ruined. My mother's careful stitches were soaked with pink fluid from my injuries, and they stank. I bundled it up in my arms and carried it to the kitchen, thinking that perhaps later I could soak it in cold water, knowing that I was not ready to admit it would never be the same. I returned to the bedroom with a pile of rags and cleaned up the floor. Finally, when the rags were on the rubbish pile and the windows opened to let in the air, though I still left the curtains drawn, I took a box from beneath the bed. If the stones spoke, I did not hear them, and was grateful.

I opened the box on the floor and took my time selecting from its contents. It was filled with handmade soap, carefully crafted in small batches and sculpted into shapes. These were all over a year old. I hadn't heated the lye vat behind the cottage for a very long time. Looking at them now awakened memories of hot, intense days spent over the vat, gathering ingredients and molding the still-warm soap with hands, wires, and pick. Days I spent living.

Finally, I brought myself back to the present and picked out a rosewood and lavender bar shaped like a cat. Then, fetching a soft towel from my carefully guarded reserve, I walked out the back door and closed it quietly behind me.

The dew-soaked leaves in the back wood were cool and primal beneath my bare feet. As I moved further from the village, I began to wake up, to feel my spirit stir. I felt tattered and tired, but the forest air, thick with the heady-sharp-sweet scent of pine, awakened me.

At last I came to my secret place. It wasn't all that hidden, but I knew no one in the village visited it. An inlet in the curve of the river that wound around to the west, it held a gently spiraling churn of clear water that was cold and deep.

I set my towel and soap on a shale outcropping near the edge and plunged in, head first.

The water was so beautiful I almost tried to breathe it in. It embraced me, caressing every inch of my skin and slicking my hair to an otter's pelt; then when I rose I felt it sway in the water, weightless and enveloping like a mermaid's. Beneath the sun-shafted ceiling I was sheltered. In my stone-walled bubble of water I felt only the elements, not even my own skin, my own pain. My heart wrung with sudden longing. The coolness against my face, behind my ears, around my waist, was sublime, and I stayed there until the pressure in my lungs grew excruciating.

My head broke the surface to a rush of sudden sound that made me appreciate the silence below all the more. Blinking droplets from my eyelashes, I tried to pierce the shadows near the bottom of the pool with my paltry human gaze, before reluctantly swimming back to the edge.

I stepped onto an underwater stack of shale near the rim of the pool and its feathery carpet of freshwater moss tickled between my toes. Already I could feel the gentle currents of the river washing away the sweat, the dirt—the anxiety, the pain—but I took up the bar of soap to make the experience complete.

The cat was unrecognizable by the time I was done, its pink surface reduced to one or two marks of detail beneath a fish-belly smoothness, but it was worth it. You should never use a bar of soap twice, anyway, not if you really want to feel clean and new, washed of pain. The lavender and rosewood flooded my lungs, and when I exhaled, even my breathing felt cleaner. When at last I walked from the pool, unflinching in my nakedness, into the touch of the forest breeze, I felt reborn and human again. Not human like those that lived around me, but human as I thought I could be. I bent and picked up my towel from the shale, savoring the brush of its plush fabric against my ribs as I wrapped it around me.

The stones had been silent throughout my self-ministrations, no longer deeply in my head, unlimited by distance or time. They did not ask again why no one had stayed with me, perhaps accepting that I understood. I could sense pain, but I could also sense fear; fear is a kind of pain. The villagers did not understand pain the way I did, and so did not understand me. How do you sit by the bedside of something you do not understand but in whose hands you place your life? Once, I had met with someone else like me. The villagers had brought her to me from another town, a larger one. But there was nothing for us to talk about. We understood each other, understood what we did. We did not ask each other if we ever missed our parents, our friends, our girlhoods; the loss had been for the greater good. When your life revolves around the needs of someone else, you have very little to bring to a conversation.

The villagers feared me, but the stones did not.

Look what they have brought you, they whispered at last, when I re-entered the cottage. I turned toward the cupboard, towel wrapped around my midsection, and for the first time I noticed the bouquet of white flowers set atop it. They were scentless, and I recognized the variety, picked from a nearby meadow.

I had been dying, and they had sent me flowers. I wondered what they were for. Condolences for my pain?

Condolences for my death?

I turned away from the cupboard, suddenly angry. Seeking something to do with myself, I walked across to the kitchen, leaving wet footprints across the plank floor. There was still water in the kettle, and I stoked the fire in the stove and heated it. In a short while I was dressed again, seated at my kitchen table, considering the day's events over a cup of strong black tea flavored with dried pomegranate.

What would you do, if you left? the stones asked. I thought of the soap, wondered how well it would sell in neighboring villages, or farther away, where no one knew me as the Bearer of Tophollow.

"People would die," I said, not looking at the cupboard.

Sometimes they need to die, the stones answered. I felt my stomach sink, though twice now I had brushed with death, mine and another's; it was not so bad, first-hand. *Sometimes,* the stones insisted, *they need to learn.*

I took a long drink of the tea, ignoring how it scalded my throat, and focused on the warming of my stomach.

Think what you have learned from us, the stones said. *Think what they have not learned.* Gradually the words grew in me, and certainty with them. Who was I, to take their pain?

The stones were like the soap: shaped by the water, and, if never moved, consumed by it.

"I am not a bearer," I said. "I am a taker."

Yes, the stones agreed.

"But not anymore."

You will leave then? Something quickened the voice in the stones. My heart accelerated ever so slightly.

"Yes. But first I have something that belongs to them."

* * *

My stones were packed into an old tackle box with my soap piled around them when I opened the front door and stepped out into the summer sunlight. I squinted instinctively and raised a hand to shade my eyes, but after a moment, it wasn't so bad. I regretted leaving my mother's quilt, but could not bear to touch it anymore. I wanted nothing from the little house save what was mine; I would find food, I could feed myself, clothe myself. I was strong. Hefting the box, I set off for the town square.

The square was a small greensward with alders at each corner. I'd put on a pair of working pants—they hadn't been used since my last turn at the lye vat—and they bunched as I climbed atop one of the benches between the trees. A few villagers passed by, some looking a bit relieved at my apparent soundness of body, but no one spoke to me. I set the tackle box across my left forearm and opened it, then plucked a stone from it at random. It was a narrow one, yellow like mild farm cheese and riddled with holes.

I took a deep breath. The villagers continued to pass without acknowledging me, a masked questioning glance here and there, but more often a gaze turned unflinchingly forward, away.

Releasing pain from a stone was something I had never done, but it proved remarkably easy. I pressed the porous yellow one to my palm with my fingers and opened its little gates. The pain came surging forth, but I did not accept it, and it sought the only other place it knew.

A scream from behind me. Matron Onna wailed with terror as a wide slash appeared across her left hand, a relic from a kitchen accident last week. I knew how she felt, and for the first time, she knew how I felt. I wanted to savor the phenomenon, but quickly moved on to the next stone.

I made it about halfway through the box before any of the villagers even realized what was going on.

For such a little place, the square could sustain an awful lot of pandemonium. Somewhat to my surprise, no one moved to stop me; they were too busy running madly through the streets and fleeing the square, screaming wildly in fear and horror as they went. Running wouldn't help; the stone's pain could find its owner anywhere in the world, I now realized, for it knew where it belonged. I think it was at that moment that I realized, guilty but resolute, how far gone they all were, to be reduced to a flock of farm chickens by a little pain.

I wasn't really thinking about that at the time, though. Something strange was happening. With every released stone I felt myself growing stronger, and I felt the voices of the stones growing fainter, still talking, but as if from a greater distance. I didn't care; I was too buoyant with elation and completion. By the last row of stones, I realized I was smiling, and had stepped down from the bench to move through the village, needing to walk, to exert some of this wonderful energy. My feet carried me toward the river road.

As I walked, I contemplated Maggie's stones. They seethed with pain, and like their brothers now whispered for release. The stones knew where Maggie was. I set them free, but let the pain sift through my fingers, changing it as I had never done before. Maggie's pain was lethal, but this time she would not die; she might only wish she had. This I did with all lethal

stones, save three: my largest, and its two companions, still warm from Vance's accident. Their heat defied softening, defied the filtering I had used on the cooler stones.

I touched a fingertip to the two smaller ones, and this time accepted the pain. With the rush of vitality in my veins, I hardly even noticed it. I didn't keep it long, though. Even as it lurched into my body I transferred it to the big stone, consolidating it all inside. Nice and clean.

Soon I approached the back of the Hammersmith house. The waterwheel was just visible beyond it. Vance stood at the back door. I walked toward him.

Gina Hammersmith, Gill's wife, was standing behind her son; I spared her half a glance before turning my attention to the boy. The pain in the stone cried out for release. Vance's jaw was slack, his chest heaving deeply. He knew his death lay in the large, flat stone. I placed my hand over it.

A sudden barking made me freeze. Vance's dog was racing toward us, her neck outstretched and her legs flying. She was very fast, and for the first time that afternoon I felt a fingertip of fear trace lightly up my spine. I had never taken pain from the dog, and so could give none to defend myself and at realizing this, I was surprised at my own abrupt desire to hurt the creature. I had never desired to give injury before, but here, in the face of this force I could not control... She could not kill me, certainly, for I could put any of my own pain into a stone, but, liberated as I was from the weight of the pain-filled stones, I had no desire to return to my cage again. My hand wrapped around the large stone, and I braced myself for the attack.

Still baying a threat and a warning, the dog skidded to a halt in front of Gina and Vance, throwing up a swathe of dust as the hair on her neck stood on end. A growl curled the dog's lip. Even in the full throes of her menace, though, she faltered when I stared to one side, avoiding meeting her challenge.

I looked down at the stone in my hand, then across at the dog. She was shaking, her slender legs quaking, whether with fear or fury I did not know. I lowered my hand, and felt a smile returning to my lips.

"I won't be afraid of you, as they were of me," I told the mutt, who lowered her lip and sniffed. "Or at least I won't act it. We both know they can't control us, in the end. I hope you never have to die for them."

The stone was heavy in my hand, and suddenly felt much less immediate than it had. I held it out to Vance, who most likely thought I was doing him far more a favor than I was. He put his hand forward to accept the stone. "Take care of that," I said. "It has your pain inside it." The boy wrapped his hands around the stone and held it to his chest.

"Bearer?" Gina said hesitantly. A large woman, heavy with muscle, she was favoring her right ankle. I remembered that ankle. I also remembered seeing her with other injuries I never tended. "Bellona? What do we do now? How will we survive without a Bearer?"

I closed my box. "You'll do what I did," I said. "You'll heal. Or you'll die."

"But..." Gina started, and Vance reached out to take her hand. She nodded.

I lifted a hand to the dog, who tolerated a pat on the head.

"Where will you go now?" Vance asked, hands and arms hiding the big stone.

"To the river," I said, giving my box a gentle shake. "Then, who knows." Up the road at the town square, the screaming had died down, and soon folk would be coming to ask questions, probably more forcefully than Gina had. I gave the woman and boy a nod, then turned toward the river road. Their eyes were upon my back as I walked, but I did not turn. It was in my mind that the other villagers might later come for me, if they could overcome their fear, but by then I should be ready for them.

The river wasn't far. Soon the stones were home again, neatly stacked in a pile beneath the cool, flowing water. For a moment I envied them. I raised a hand to my lips in farewell and turned away.

Tackle box empty now, save for the soap, I started following the road north, absently scratching at a mosquito bite on the back of my right hand. I thought of lavender fields, of a fragrant herb garden, and of a quiet cottage in the woods, where there were no polished stones, and no fear.

The End

Erin Hoffman is a freelance author and game designer currently residing in Troy, New York. She lives with her husband and a small cadre of pets surreptitiously plotting world domination. Her work has appeared in three print anthologies and online. Further information can be found on her website, http://www.gryphonflight.com.

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